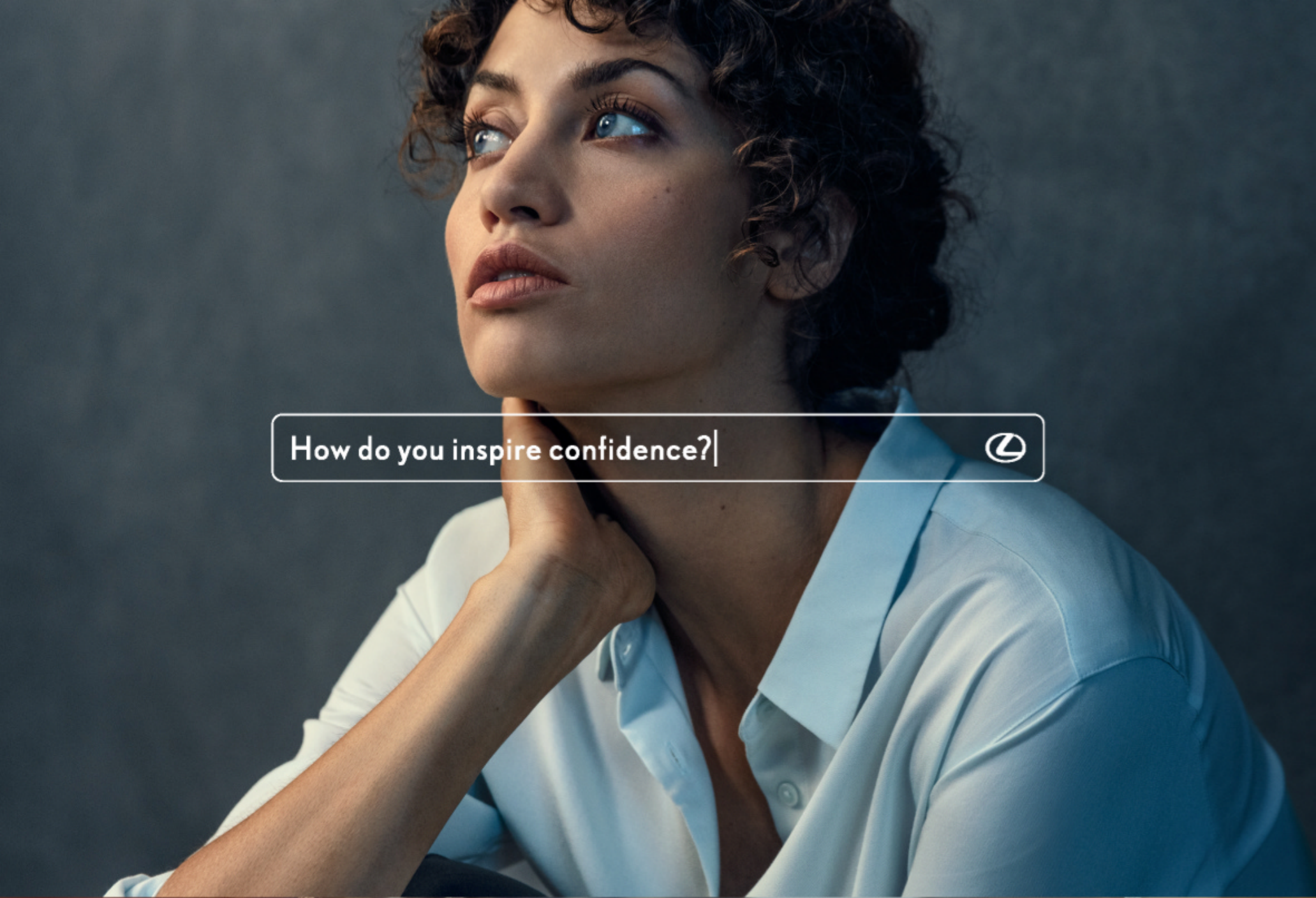




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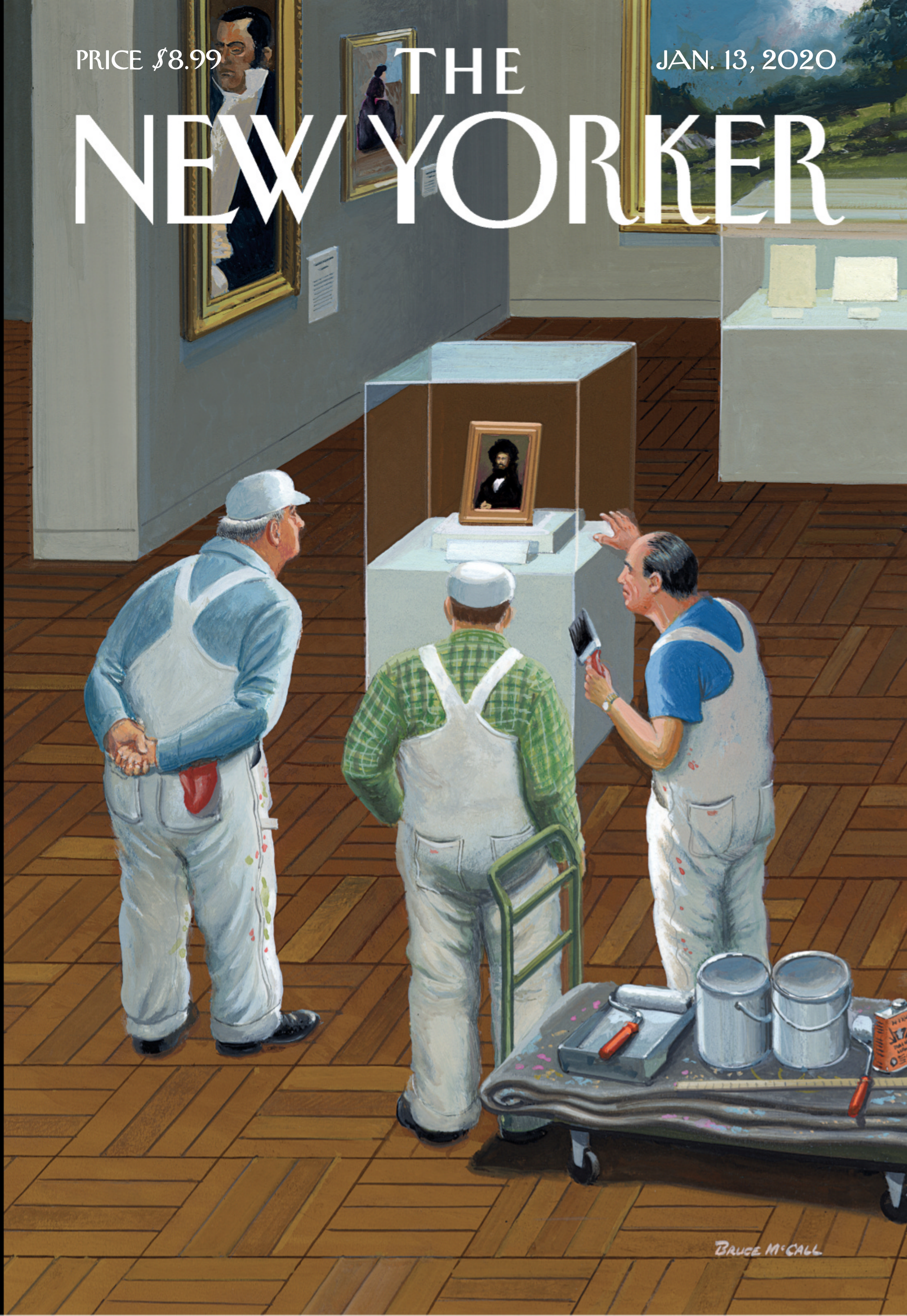
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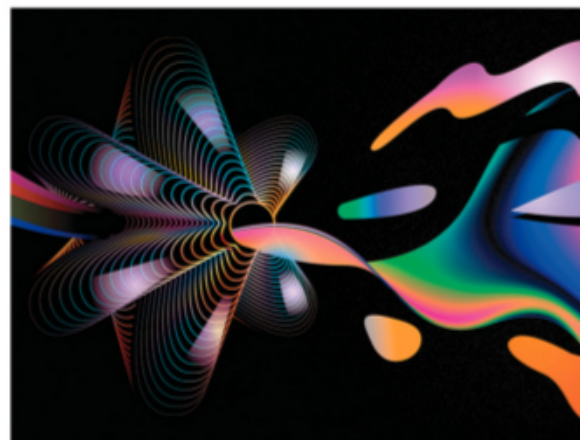
Giles Harvey (*A Critic at Large*, p. 63) is a contributing writer at the *Times Magazine*. He has written for *The New Yorker* since 2011.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



CULTURE DESK

Carrie Battan on electronic bracelets for long-distance daters, which swap physical presence for a haptic buzz.



ANNALS OF INQUIRY

Machines are learning to write poetry. Dan Rockmore asks how we should appreciate computer-generated art.

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THE MAIL

A DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS

Dexter Filkins's searing, unflinching piece about India under Narendra Modi should be read by all Indians ("Blood and Soil in India," December 9th). The country that Filkins describes bears little resemblance to the one I grew up in. As I was reading, I noticed that the horrific incidents of lynching, mob violence, and state complicity in federal machinations detailed in the article occurred primarily in the north of the country. These stories seem to suggest that Modi's vision of a Hindu-nationalist state has less traction in South India. Recent election results show something similar: during the 2019 national election, the B.J.P., Modi's political party, won a majority of seats in only one of the five South Indian states. South India is just as diverse as the north, or even more so. But, though South India faces its own challenges, it has proved remarkably resistant to the B.J.P.'s Hindu-nationalist narrative.

Preserving the extraordinary diversity of the Indian subcontinent requires a commitment to secular, democratic values. At one time, being a patriot meant being committed to such values. Now they are routinely decried as prescribed by a Western elite and a complacent Congress Party. The challenge for citizens seeking to build a counter-narrative to the B.J.P. is how to do so without demonizing minority groups. Exploring how South Indian politicians and activists have managed to stem the tide of the B.J.P.'s exclusionary agenda could help save my country from the future that it is hurtling toward.

Sadhana Sanjay
The Hague, the Netherlands

Filkins's reporting on Modi's troubling background and policies is characteristically excellent. However, it struck me as odd that a piece centered on Hindu-Muslim tensions made no mention of the 2006 Islamic-terrorist train bombing in Mumbai and the bombings that took place in Bangalore, Ahmedabad,

and Mumbai in 2008. These attacks collectively killed hundreds of Indians and likely stoked the fear and hatred that gave rise to Modi and his virulent brand of Hindu nationalism.

Greg Schwed
New York City

I ache seeing how easily and quickly the toxic brew of bigotry, corruption, and majoritarianism can diminish a democracy. I was brought up in a Hindu Brahmin family in India during the nineteen-seventies and eighties, and I witnessed the prejudices concealed beneath our superficially civil interactions with Muslims. My mother, who was cordial to Muslims in conversation, would nevertheless wash any kitchen utensils touched by a Muslim before using them herself. Modi, like Donald Trump, has shown that latent bigotry is a deep resource, more easily mined and exploited by a demagogue than polite society ever allowed itself to believe.

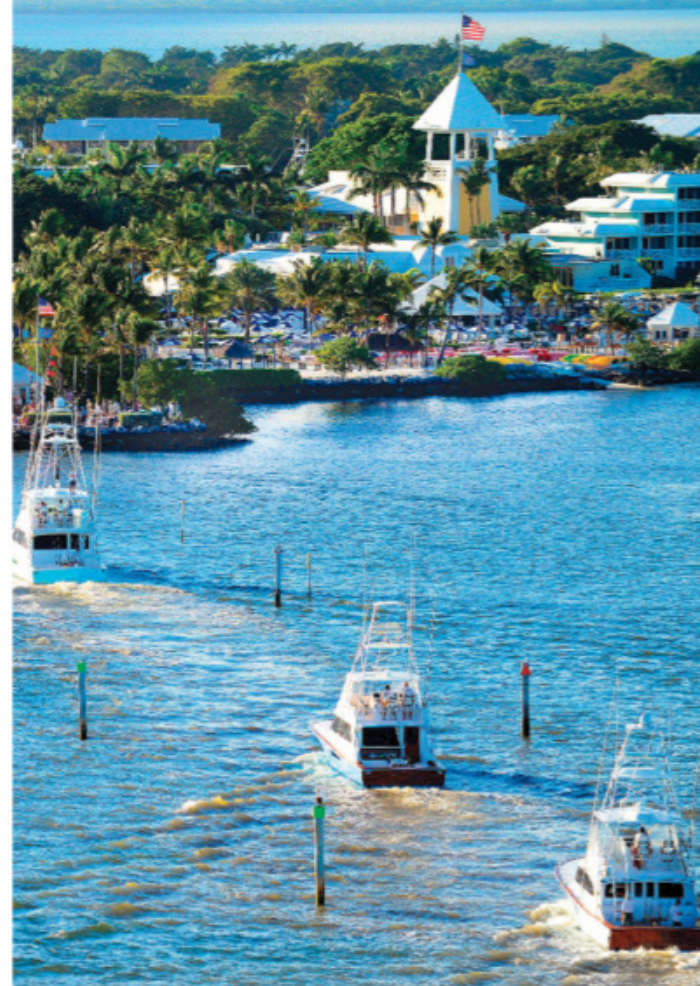
Harish Sethu
Ardmore, Pa.

Filkins leaves the reader petrified when he suggests that the muckraking journalist Rana Ayyub should leave India for good. Although it is undeniably true that Indian democracy is currently facing enormous challenges, people living on the subcontinent have long espoused tolerance and religious pluralism; furthermore, India is still an experiment in democracy. For centuries, the country has been a melting pot of policies, ideologies, leaders, and practices. Modi's government represents a grim reality for people from a variety of religions, cultures, and ethnicities—but, if history is to be believed, this, too, shall pass.

Cyril Cherian
Kottayam, India

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



The alto saxophonist **Lakecia Benjamin** plays jazz that is sprinkled with the rich flavors of funk and soul—she’s a crafty traditionalist who remains in step with the rhythms of the young generation. (One cut on her most recent album, “Rise Up,” reimagined Rihanna’s “Stay” through the sultry tones of her horn.) As part of this year’s Winter Jazzfest marathons, running Jan. 10-11 at venues around Manhattan, Benjamin presents music from her upcoming project, “Pursuance,” an homage to the brilliant, timeless work of Alice and John Coltrane.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA PETTWAY

ART

“Artist’s Choice: Amy Sillman” Museum of Modern Art

Prunella Clough (1919-99), a superbly weird British modernist who deserves to be better known, was fond of a quote by Édouard Manet: “Painting is like throwing oneself into the sea to learn to swim.” Looking at art can be like that, too—a crash course and a full-body experience. Visitors to the new MOMA can take that kind of plunge in “The Shape of Shape,” a big show in a small space filled with seventy-one paintings, sculptures, photographs, drawings, and prints from the museum’s collection, all chosen by the voraciously smart Amy Sillman, a superbly weird painter herself. (She contributes a blood-red wall work to the show, equal parts shadow and viscera.) Sillman chose the catchall concept of shape because it’s off the grid—less theorized than, say, color or systems. The installation, which proceeds in an obstreperous progression of four rows on three walls, covers more than a century, from 1890 to 2017, but it eschews chronology in favor of dream logic and gut instinct. Marquee names (Calder, Duchamp, Matisse, Rodin), artists’ artists (Forrest Bess, Prunella Clough, Arthur Dove, Christina Ramberg), and the frankly obscure (the Croatian sculptor Ivan Kožarić) all become firsts among equals.—*Andrea K. Scott* (Through April 20.)

“Memory Palaces” American Folk Art Museum

This wonderful, salon-style exhibition is culled from Audrey B. Heckler’s vast private collection of works by self-taught artists, much of which usually adorns the walls of her Upper East Side apartment. It conveys the breadth of her interests and also her particular passions. One of the latter is the American painter William L. Hawkins—who is identifiable by his bold enamel-on-Masonite compositions and the 1895 birth date that he emblazoned at the bottom of each of his pieces. A Last Supper homage and an ebullient rendition of a Wendy’s restaurant, both painted in the nineteen-eighties, are highlights here. Others include a feathery ink drawing of a many-faced entity by the Chinese artist Guo Fengyi; a trio of the Milwaukee polymath Eugene Von Bruenchenhein’s foliated ceramic vessels; a work on paper by the Ethiopian artist Gedewon Makonnen, featuring fluid latticework designs in rich tempera hues; and a haunting silhouette made of ballpoint filigree faces by Mehrdad Rashidi, from northern Iran. Although diverse, the art on view is united, as the show’s title suggests, by a shrugging off of realist observation in favor of vividly mapped recollections and interior landscapes.—*Johanna Fateman* (Through Jan. 26.)

Suzy Lake Arsenal Contemporary Art

DOWNTOWN This influential feminist artist, who moved from Detroit to Canada in the late nineteen-sixties, makes her New York solo debut with a powerful show of performance-based photographs and videos. Two works at the entrance introduce her endur-

ing concern: gendered cosmetic rituals. In a grid of images titled “Imitation of Myself #2” (1973/2013), the artist applies feminine makeup—conventional but for an acerbic foundation of clown-white greasepaint. “Pluck #2” (2001/17) shows the bottom half of a face, whose glossy red lips are juxtaposed with unruly chin hairs—targeted by tweezers—sending a pointed mixed message about aging and beauty. In the most memorable of Lake’s confrontational works, the series “Choreographed Puppet” (1976/2007), men hold the strings that control a living marionette played by the artist herself. It might have been too blunt a metaphor for patriarchal control, but, instead, the images have a surprising complexity.—*J.F.* (Through Jan. 18.)

Nicky Nodjoumi Anrather

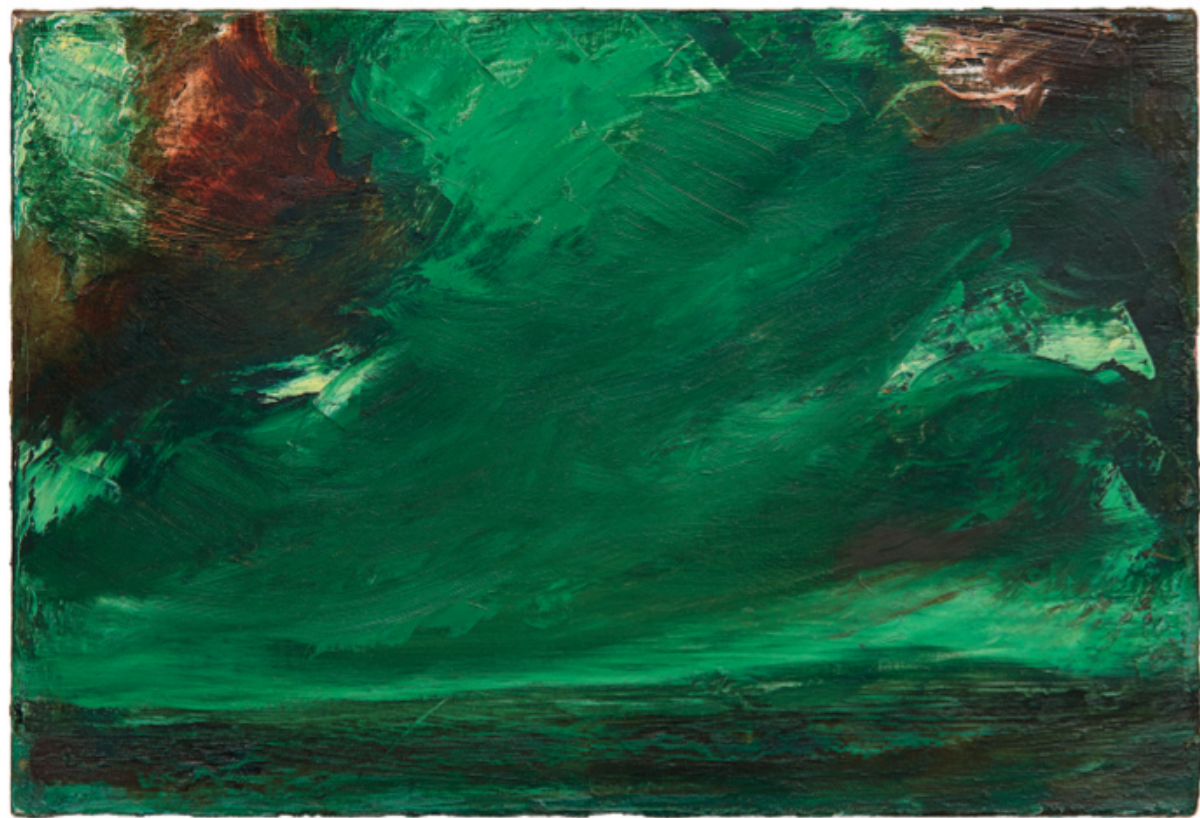
DOWNTOWN In 1981, this painter fled his native Iran for New York City when his solo exhibition at the Tehran Museum was shut down by Ayatollah Khomeini, one day after it opened. Sixteen years later, short on cash for supplies and working in the Brooklyn loft he shared with his wife and daughter, Nodjoumi began painting on the front page of the *Times*, a daily practice that lasted three years. The artist, who is seventy-seven, has kept the series private until

now. Sixty stunning excerpts are on view in this powerful show, which is installed intuitively rather than chronologically, portraying life as a cyclical drama of dual realities: human and animal, waking and dreaming, political and erotic, brutal and beautiful.—*A.K.S.* (Through Jan. 19.)

“Coniunctio” Bureau

DOWNTOWN In this inspired pairing, the artists Kyung-Me and Harry Gould Harvey IV share an interest in idiosyncratic metaphysical realms. Harvey works with the intensity of an oracle (or perhaps a conspiracist) in delicate, annotated drawings; gracefully spiky wood frames, evoking Gothic architecture, transform his syncretic cosmograms into decorative, devotional objects. Kyung-Me’s ultra-precise ink drawings, which resemble both Renaissance etchings and finely wrought computer-generated renderings, are windows into starkly glamorous modernist interiors. Her laborious depictions of immaculate surfaces and other accoutrements of wealth—a Jackson Pollock painting, a grand piano, spectacular flower arrangements—lend these austere sanctuaries a fantastically sinister air. The seven moody works on paper provide an ideal backdrop for the show’s bizarre centerpiece: Harvey’s tiered tabletop configuration of red wax figurines and vignettes, dense

AT THE GALLERIES



When he died of AIDS, at the age of forty-four, in 1993, the painter **Jesse Murry** left behind a number of canvases and works on paper in his New York studio that not only revealed a dreamy, lyrical talent but also hinted at the deeply detailed artist he would have become. In a small show at the Tibor de Nagy gallery (through Jan. 12), the artist’s beautiful color sense is on full display, as is his interest in abstraction as a kind of landscape filled with the splendor of the earth and the expansiveness of the sky. Murry’s works are not large in scale, but they promote big dreams: his terrain is the unfettered mind and eye. He draws you in with his liquid awareness of how paint works on canvas, and how color and form can and should be handled delicately, and with respect.—*Hilton Als*

with Biblical references and pagan imagery. It rests on a scuffed, faux-Saarinen tulip base, as if in scrappy tribute to Kyung-Me's purgatorial luxe.—*J.F. (Through Jan. 19.)*

CLASSICAL MUSIC

New York Philharmonic

David Geffen Hall

Two of England's most potent and intelligent musicians, the conductor Daniel Harding and the pianist Paul Lewis, converge on Lincoln Center for this week's Philharmonic offerings. Lewis is the soloist in Grieg's Piano Concerto, a familiar work that retains its ardor and charm; Harding also conducts Strauss's picturesque "Alpine Symphony."—*Steve Smith (Jan. 9 at 7:30, Jan. 10 at 2, Jan. 11 at 8.)*

Ferus Festival

National Sawdust

The Ferus Festival, National Sawdust's week-long plunge into experimental storytelling, ric-

ochets between individual and collective experiences. Two of Sawdust's artists-in-residence offer deeply personal programs: Lucy Dhegrae, a survivor of sexual assault, contends with how trauma gives way to recovery through haunting pieces by Philippe Leroux and Francis Poulenc; Sonic, who is partially deaf, uses the venue's new Meyer Sound system to re-create her aural experience. Sarah Hennies's "Come 'Round Right" takes inspiration from Shaker hymns—the artifacts of a community that has all but disappeared—and Sister Sylvester's "The Eagle and the Tortoise" asks audience members to read an illustrated storybook together while wearing headlamps. The festival closes with a workshop performance of "Untitled," for which the composers Ellen Reid and Paola Prestini have each written a monodrama based on one of the images from Cindy Sherman's famously elusive "Untitled Film Stills."—*Oussama Zahr (Jan. 10-17.)*

Longleash

Flushing Town Hall

To mark the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of Beethoven's birth, the vibrant piano trio Longleash emphasizes the iconic

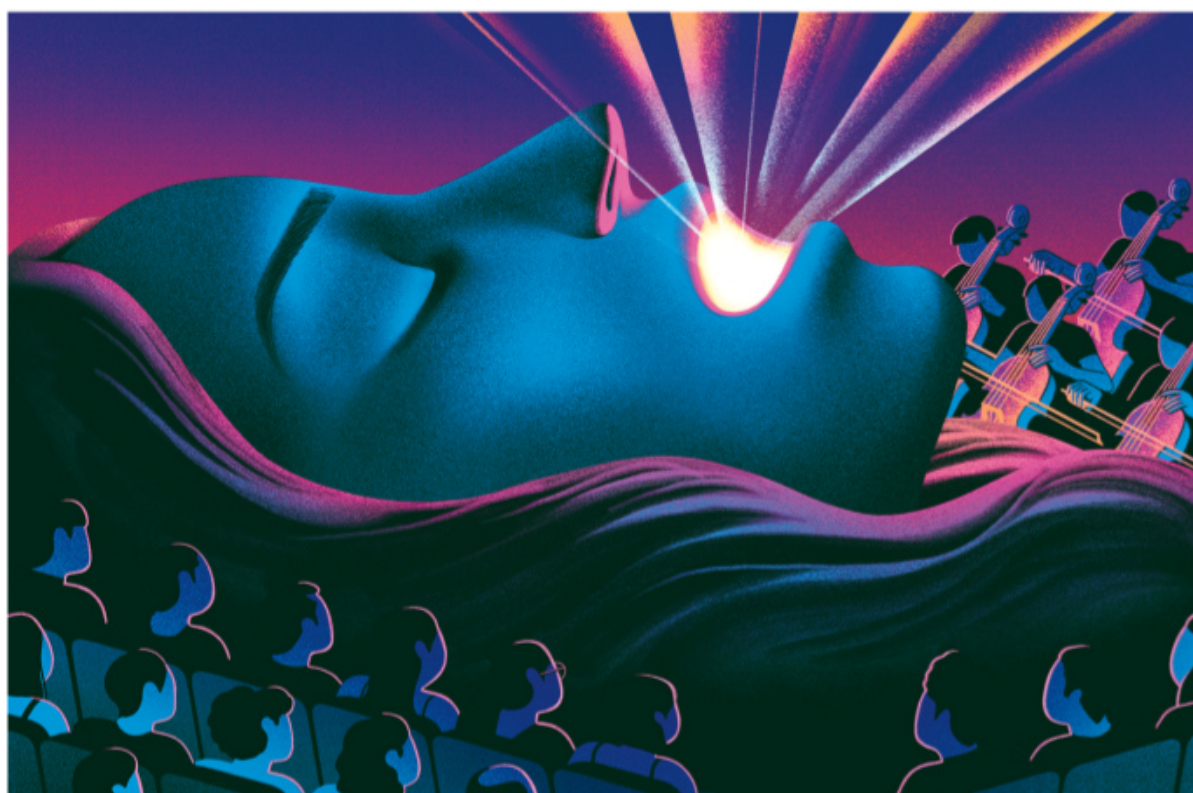
composer's courageous iconoclasm, placing his works alongside latter-day responses. The program, presented by Five Boroughs Music Festival, includes Beethoven's early Trio in C Minor (Op. 1, No. 3) and his well-loved "Ghost" Trio, plus John Zorn's "Ghosts" and Reiko Füting's "free – whereof – wherefore," a world première. On Jan. 12, the ensemble brings the festivities to Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, in Manhattan.—*S.S. (Jan. 10 at 7:30.)*

"La Traviata"

Metropolitan Opera House

Michael Mayer's sufficient production of Verdi's "La Traviata," which opened with a pretty little shrug last season, plays in two separate runs—this time helmed by the sopranos Aleksandra Kurzak and Lisette Oropesa, who have in common sparkly voices with a touch of warmth. For the January performances, Kurzak is joined by Dmytro Popov and Quinn Kelsey; Karel Mark Chichon conducts. Also playing: The Met's season-opening production of "Porgy and Bess" returns (Jan. 8 and Jan. 11 at 7:30), with Angel Blue and Kevin Short in the title roles.—*O.Z. (Jan. 10 and Jan. 14 at 7:30.)*

NEW-MUSIC FESTIVAL



The eight-year-old **Prototype Festival**, which runs Jan. 9-19 at intimate venues around the city, has turned a once fallow tract of the classical-music calendar into one of the most exciting and boundary-pushing stretches of opera and music theatre in New York. Jennifer Zetlan and Nathan Gunn star in this year's marquee production, "Ellen West," in which Ricky Ian Gordon applies his heartfelt lyricism to Frank Bidart's 1977 poem about a woman whose eating disorder stymied doctors' efforts at intervention. In "Magdalene," fourteen female composers come together to reconstitute the persona of Mary Magdalene, and, in "Rev. 23," Julian Wachner and Cerise Lim Jacobs perform a similar act of reimagination using the Book of Revelation. Three other pieces—Jeremy Schonfeld's rock opera "Iron & Coal," Garrett Fisher's Noh-inspired "Blood Moon," and Gregory Vuyani Maqoma's dance piece "Cion"—explore the ways music helps us connect with or mourn our ancestors.—*Oussama Zahr*

Maya Beiser

Brookfield Place Winter Garden

Four years after the chameleonic art-pop icon David Bowie died, Maya Beiser, a cellist of similar protean inclinations, honors his memory with "Aura Blackstar." The music is adapted from "Bowie Cello Symphonic: Blackstar," an orchestral adaption of Bowie's final album, which Beiser created and recorded with the composer Evan Ziporyn. For this free concert, she plays an arrangement for solo cello with electronic accompaniment and immersive video projections.—*S.S. (Jan. 10 at 8.)*

Ekmeles

DiMenna Center

Given how ubiquitous the extraordinary vocal ensemble Ekmeles has been in recent years, it seems almost impossible that the group has only now issued the first record under its own name. "A Howl, That Was Also a Prayer" includes two large-scale microtonal works created expressly for the group—"Motorman Sextet," by Taylor Brook, and "End Words," by Christopher Trapani—plus an arrangement of Erin Gee's "Three Scenes from SLEEP." All three pieces are featured in this concert, and admission includes a complimentary copy of the album.—*S.S. (Jan. 11 at 7:30.)*

Rosa Feola

Park Avenue Armory

Rosa Feola's lyric soprano beautifully balances roundness, clarity, and color in its composition, but her expressivity—the way she feels and shapes the music—makes her more than just a pretty voice. Feola and the pianist Iain Burnside derive much of this recital program from their 2015 album, "Musica e Poesia,"

which demonstrates both their understanding of her assets and their discerning taste in Italian art songs, with selections by Respighi, Liszt, Rossini, and Ponchielli, among others.—*O.Z.* (Jan. 13 and Jan. 15 at 7:30.)

String Orchestra of Brooklyn Roulette

The String Orchestra of Brooklyn, an enterprising ensemble that consistently enriches the city's artistic landscape, heralds the arrival of its long-overdue debut studio recording. The shrewdly assembled album, "afterimage," includes brief works by Paganini and Pergolesi that provide the germinal material for substantial new offerings by Christopher Cerrone ("High Windows," featuring the Argus String Quartet) and Jacob Cooper ("Stabat Mater Dolorosa," with the soprano Mellissa Hughes and the mezzo-soprano Kate Maroney). Those guest artists reassemble here for performances of the Cerrone and Cooper works.—*S.S.* (Jan. 13 at 8.)

DANCE

Aki Sasamoto Danspace Project

The installation and performance artist Aki Sasamoto is a builder of witty assemblages, which she cobbles together from seemingly random everyday objects. Through these constructions, she explores personal themes or whatever question she happens to be thinking about at a particular moment. As Sasamoto once put it, "My art work is an excuse to do what I want to do." In "Phase Transition," a site-specific installation at St. Mark's Church, she ponders life's transitions, including motherhood and aging. The piece involves a mechanism that modifies air circulation in the space, creating light, fog, air currents, and other atmospheric effects, within which she and Jessica Weinstein will perform.—*Marina Harss* (Jan. 9-11 and Jan. 16-18.)

Mariana Valencia Performance Space New York

Both when dancing and when talking Valencia is low-key, calm, self-assured. The tone helps hold together what she collages in performance: the dancing, sometimes with steps borrowed from others, and the talking, often about herself and the people who matter to her. In "AIR," she remembers figures from the Spanish-speaking media she encountered as a child, taking on the role of news announcer to report on influence.—*Brian Seibert* (Jan. 9-11 and Jan. 16-18.)

Sean Dorsey New York Live Arts

The San Francisco-based choreographer Sean Dorsey, who is transgender, didn't begin studying dance formally until he was twenty-five, in part because he felt uncom-

CONTEMPORARY DANCE



When the adept choreographer **Faye Driscoll** set out to make a trilogy of works called "Thank You for Coming," the titular sentiment was sincere. She's friendly, and these pieces hinge on the performer-audience relationship. In the first installment, subtitled "Attendance" (2014), viewers were roped into a sort of Maypole dance. In the second, "Play" (2016), spectators contributed phrases to a collective autobiography read aloud by the cast. Both were big ensemble efforts that resembled clever, complex theatre-class games, and the dominant tone was sophomoric. But, in the final section, "Space," receiving its New York premiere at New York Live Arts, Jan. 8-11, Driscoll goes solo and gets serious, at least in subject: this one is about death. Just because she's alone doesn't mean that audience members are off the hook, though. She asks them for help. And, when this meditation on mortality gets messy, as Driscoll's shows usually do, everyone is implicated.—*Brian Seibert*

fortable in gendered dance classes. But the need to dance, and to create dances, would not be denied. "Boys in Trouble," his newest work for his company, Sean Dorsey Dance, is a meditation on masculinity and prejudice, with a strong autobiographical slant. Dance is interspersed with passages of spoken text, in which Dorsey and his four fellow-dancers recount personal experiences of heartache, incomprehension, homophobia, and transphobia. The mood is sincere, vulnerable, and even, at times, lighthearted. The show is as much an act of affirmation as it is a dance.—*M.H.* (Jan. 12-14.)

Les Ballet Afrik / Ephrat Asherie Guggenheim Museum

This "Works & Process" event previews two pieces that will debut separately later this year. In "New York Is Burning," the Senegalese-born voguer Omari Wiles celebrates the thirtieth anniversary of "Paris Is Burning," the seminal documentary about voguing and ballroom culture. But he and his company, Les Ballet Afrik, do so in his own "AfrikFusion" style, blending vogue and house with

the West African traditions in which he was raised. Ephrat Asherie Dance performs excerpts from "UnderScored," a new piece by Asherie, who is herself accomplished in choreographing stylistic blends. It's also a tribute to history and roots—that of the underground house-dance community.—*B.S.* (Jan. 13-14.)

NIGHT LIFE

Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

Philly Reunion Blue Note

Philadelphia's jazz heritage stretches deep into the music's history—the fifties alone produced, among others, Benny Golson, Lee Morgan, and an up-and-comer named John Coltrane—and the friendly city continues to give rise to exceptional players. For this engagement, three nationally prominent

AMERICANA

Modern Americana isn't known for its breadth of black artists, let alone British ones, but the singer-songwriter **Yola** is both—and an undeniable force. Molded in the traditions of country, roots, and folk and bursting with soul, her début album, “Walk Through Fire,” feels yanked from another time; her powerful voice soars over beds of fiddles and Wurlitzer-driven melodies, proudly wearing Dolly Parton's influence on its sleeve. The title is somewhat literal—she did escape a house fire—but her journey, pocked with hardships, resulted in a record that is regal and decidedly triumphant. Though her performance at Music Hall of Williamsburg, on Jan. 8, falls mere weeks before the Grammys (she earned four nominations, including Best New Artist), the simple fact of her existence, and her persistence, is cause for celebration.—*Briana Younger*

natives—the bassist Christian McBride, the keyboardist Joey DeFrancesco, and the guitarist Kurt Rosenwinkel—join a stalwart local treasure, the drummer Lil' John Roberts, to investigate what makes contemporary Philly-sourced jazz so, well, funky.—*Steve Futterman* (Jan. 9-12.)

Hieroglyphic Being Basement

Though Chicago house music tends toward the freaky, the work of the Windy City native Jamal Moss, a.k.a. Hieroglyphic Being, is genuinely woolly—his synthesizer lines often have a slaphappy, devil-may-care blurriness, and his drums clatter as much as they pulsate. That methodology injects urgency into a typically rigid style—take, for example, the irresistible galumph Moss adds to his remix of the Korean dance star Peggy Gou's “It Makes You Forget (Itgehane)” —and should make this live hardware performance particularly flavorful.—*Michaelangelo Matos* (Jan. 10.)

Working Women Nowadays

The members of the New York d.j. trio Working Women—DJ Nicely, DJ Nina, and DJ Voices, who play separately as well as together—often sound as if they're surprising one another as much as they are their audience. Their sets defy formula, jackknifing around the house, techno, and breaks continua without sounding willful, like tour guides eliding obvious landmarks in favor of beloved neighborhood places. For this edition of their bimonthly Ridgewood residency, they host Amsterdam's equally adventurous DJ Marcelle.—*M.M.* (Jan. 10.)



Trail of Tears Continuum Roulette

William Parker's large-scale projects, with their unabashed directness and vigor, can mirror the force of his collar-grabbing bass playing. “The Trail of Tears Continuum 1492–2020,” an original tone poem that incorporates music, poetry, dance, and video, is inspired by the fateful forced relocation of the indigenous Cherokee and Choctaw nations. Among the players in Parker's ensemble are the trombonist Steve Swell and a longtime rhythm mate, the drummer Hamid Drake.—*S.F.* (Jan. 10-11.)

Alsarah and the Nubatones Chelsea Music Hall

The singer-songwriter Alsarah fled her native Sudan and then Yemen before finishing her childhood in Massachusetts. In many ways, her elegant songs—performed in Arabic and often with an oud—are rooted in the region of her birth. Yet the Nubatones are a New York band, and the vocalist, who studied ethnomusicology at Wesleyan, adds a sense of worldliness and liteness to traditional sounds. They headline a showcase that also features Nubian Messengers and the Reminders.—*Jay Ruttenberg* (Jan. 11.)

Blue Hawaii Baby's All Right

In 2010, the Canadian electro-pop duo Blue Hawaii released its début album, “Blooming Summer,” filled with sounds as spacious and dreamy as a warm vacation. The twosome—made up of Raphaëlle Standell-Preston, from the band Braids, and Alex (Agor) Kerby—has since ventured down darker avenues, experimenting with the electric power of nocturnal clubs scattered across Europe and Canada. Its

latest release, “Open Reduction Internal Fixation,” is a winding labyrinth of dance floors, each throbbing with trance, house, pop, and more.—*Julysa Lopez* (Jan. 11.)

Dominique Fils-Aimé Nublu

A heavyhearted, bluesy guitar opens “Like Mama Said,” the lead track from Dominique Fils-Aimé's EP “The Red,” but not even the song's aching chords can match the emotion that the Canadian singer conveys with her voice. She fills every nook and cranny of the melody, and her tone is so tender and disarming that it's won her comparisons to such bygone greats as Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday. Still, the 2019 Polaris-nominated artist doesn't imitate the past—she uses its inspirations to compose contemporary soul that tackles oppression and offers hope for the present day.—*J.L.* (Jan. 11.)

globalFEST The Copacabana

GlobalFEST was launched, in 2004, with the goal of exposing concert bookers—in town for a larger convention—to musicians from far-flung locales. One needn't be an industry type to savor this annual showcase, which affords the musically curious a peek at a global bounty spread across three stages. From shamanic Korean folk-pop (the delightfully uncanny Ak Dan Gwang Chil) to Algerian psychedelia (Sofiane Saidi and Mazalda), all make a noisy case for porous borders in an age of closure.—*J.R.* (Jan. 12.)

Hamilton Leithauser Café Carlyle

Since 2018, the disparate worlds of indie rock and cabaret have converged in Hamilton Leithauser's January run at Café Carlyle. Leithauser made his bones singing in the Walkmen, a band with a brooding and at times explosive rumble, rendering this singer an unlikely ambassador to highborn cabaret. Yet, more than just clichéd rockers, the Walkmen always resembled characters ripped from a Whit Stillman movie, and Leithauser's every bellow comes laced with opulence—all nicely aligning with the Carlyle's Marcel Vertès murals and antiquated jacket mandate.—*J.R.* (Jan. 14-18.)

THE THEATRE

Freestyle Love Supreme Booth

In this new improvised rap show on Broadway, directed by Thomas Kail and created by Kail, Anthony Veneziale, and Lin-Manuel Miranda, there is no playwright, only rappers (Veneziale, Utkarsh Ambudkar, and Aneesa Folds), a pair of beatboxers (Chris Sullivan and Kaila Mul-lady), and two keyboardists (Arthur Lewis and Ian Weinberger). Veneziale, who is the show's m.c. in addition to participating in the freestyles, moves crisply from one set piece to the next; Ambudkar most ably turns his barrage of words into workable narrative and

clearly felt emotion. In one segment, they riff on audience members' deep irritations—daylight-saving time, mayonnaise, and boys, one night. In another, an audience member tells a story of regret, which the ensemble acts (and raps) out straightforwardly and then reinvents counterfactually to “correct” it. At a recent show, Miranda was a “special guest” (there will be several throughout the run). He was rapping as he entered, but you couldn't make out the words over the applause—it didn't matter what he was saying, only that he was there.—*Vinson Cunningham* (Reviewed in our issue of 10/14/19.) (Through Jan. 12.)

Greater Clements

Mitzi E. Newhouse

In Samuel D. Hunter's new play, Maggie (Judith Ivey) lives in Clements, an Idaho mining town that has no more miners and is losing its status as a town, too. Resentful of Californian invaders, locals have decided to unincorporate: street lights are off, and Maggie, who runs a museum dedicated to the area's mining history, is closing up shop. She's ready to move on, especially once Billy (Ken Narasaki), a past love, arrives to offer her a future, but she's held back by her son, Joe (Edmund Donovan), an isolated and socially inept twenty-seven-year-old. The pace of this restrained character study, directed by Davis McCallum, is lifelike, if sometimes too slow; Hunter has a classical sense of structure that verges on the predictable, and the last half hour could be scrapped. But there is deep, complex feeling here, and a standout performance from Donovan as an overgrown boy desperate to learn to be a man.—*Alexandra Schwartz* (Through Jan. 19.)

Little Shop of Horrors

Westside

The director Michael Mayer has a straightforward mission in this Off Broadway revival of Howard Ashman's demented and beloved musical comedy (with music by Alan Menken), about a bloodthirsty plant in a Skid Row flower shop, circa 1960: to reclaim it from the nation's high-school theatre departments and give it an impeccably faithful and professional production, as close as possible in spirit to the original Off Broadway show that Ashman directed, in 1982. The show succeeds beautifully, and everyone watching it and performing in it—including Jonathan Groff, as Seymour; Tammy Blanchard, as Audrey; and Christian Borle, as Orin and many others—seems to be having a blast. The script's handful of domestic-abuse jokes strike a discordant note, but over all its pitch-dark Faustian shtick feels delightfully appropriate to these miserably venal times.—*Rollo Romig* (Through March 15.)

Slave Play

Golden

Jeremy O. Harris's tonally uneven yet intellectually ruthless play, directed by Robert O'Hara, has transferred to Broadway after premiering, last winter, at New York Theatre Workshop. In the first, tense act, the mirrored set reflecting both a vista of a Southern plantation and the audience, three couples in antebellum costumes enact sexual battles of sorts: Kaneisha (Joaquina

Kalukango) is a black slave who wants the white “Massa” Jim (Paul Alexander Nolan) to call her “Negress” while he orders her to clean the floor; Phillip (the hilarious Sullivan Jones) is a light-skinned black slave summoned by his unhinged white mistress, Alana (Annie McNamara), for violin playing and much more; and Gary (Ato Blankson-Wood) is a black slave commanding the white indentured servant Dustin (a genially showboating James Cusati-Moyer) to do his kinky bidding. When the couples are revealed to be part of an academic therapy study—led by Téa (the pitch-perfect Chalia La Tour) and Patricia (Irene Sofia Lucio)—Harris's trenchant, raw exploration of the long, inescapable shadow that America's past casts on even the most intimate relationships unfolds in devastating increments.—*Shauna Lyon* (Through Jan. 19.)

The Sound Inside

Studio 54

Mary-Louise Parker's magnetism is hard to pin down, largely because it comes from somewhere antecedent to any line she delivers or gesture she executes. Hers is an art of thought, and it's edifying to watch her puzzle

through an idea just before she parts her lips to convey it. “The Sound Inside,” an interesting, uneven play by Adam Rapp, directed by David Cromer, is worth seeing for the chance it offers Parker to wrinkle her brow. She plays Bella, a wry writer and professor in the middle of a crisis. Meeting a new student, Christopher (Will Hochman), sends her ideas about writing and life into a messy spiral. The play is delivered partly in scenes, but mostly in monologues that sound more like prose than speech. As Bella, Parker reaches for a phrase in that way of hers, then rushes to write it down. This interplay between showing and telling—display and description—often feels forced, but it points toward a promising formal breakthrough that Rapp doesn't quite reach here.—*V.C.* (Through Jan. 12.)

MOVIES

Cats

In the beginning was T. S. Eliot's “Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats,” published in 1939. Somehow, with much mauling and

THEATRE FESTIVAL



Now in its sixteenth year, the **Under the Radar Festival**, the Public Theatre's annual smorgasbord of the avant-garde (Jan. 8-19), is still seeking out theatrical innovation at home and abroad. The origins of this year's offerings are particularly far-flung. In “Andares,” from Makuyeika Colectivo Teatral, the writer-director Héctor Flores Komatsu chronicles the lives, myths, and struggles of Mexico's indigenous communities. In “salt,” the British playwright Selina Thompson retraces the transatlantic slave trade and winds up, by the power of stage logic, at the bottom of the ocean. The Beijing-based director Wang Chong and his Théâtre du Rêve Expérimental reimagine the Nick Payne play “Constellations” with the aid of multimedia and a live hamster. And, in “To the Moon,” the Taiwanese artist Hsin-Chien Huang joins New York's own downtown stalwart Laurie Anderson to create a virtual-reality trip to the lunar surface. For the complete schedule, visit publictheater.org.—*Michael Schulman*

misshaping, the book was turned into a musical, which opened on Broadway, in 1982, and which now forms the basis of Tom Hooper's freakish film. The action unfolds in a heavily stylized and largely nocturnal London, and the actors are, in the fullest sense, transmogrified—made feline by the addition of digital fur. However amazing the trickery may be, though, the characters fall awkwardly into the crack between animal and human, and the plot, which requires them to sing and dance in competition with one another, is scarcely more convincing. The cast is a mixed bag, containing Taylor Swift, Rebel Wilson, Ray Winstone, Ian McKellen, Judi Dench, and Idris Elba; the most elegant presence is that of Francesca Hayward, of the Royal Ballet, as a silver-coated cat named Victoria.—*Anthony Lane* (In wide release.)

Little Women

Yet another adaptation of the classic novel, which seems to encourage a fresh approach from every generation. The latest version is directed by Greta Gerwig, and, like those

who have attempted the task before her—George Cukor, Mervyn LeRoy, and Gillian Armstrong—she has assembled a potent cast. Saoirse Ronan, at her most strong-willed, plays Jo March, with Florence Pugh in equally striking form as Amy, Emma Watson as Meg, and Eliza Scanlen as Beth. Laura Dern is the girls' mother and Meryl Streep their stern but perspicacious aunt. Gerwig—who also wrote the screenplay—keeps looping back and forth in time, rarely slackening, and creating the impression of young souls ever ready for experience, whether joyous or forlorn; the result feels not loosely episodic but tightly bound, like the book on which Jo toils by candlelight. With Tracy Letts as her publisher and Timothée Chalamet as the doe-eyed object of almost everybody's affections.—*A.L.* (Reviewed in our issue of 1/6/20.) (In wide release.)

1917

In the depths of the First World War, two young British soldiers (George MacKay and Dean-Charles Chapman) are faced with a

near-impossible task. They've been ordered to carry a message, by hand, to the front line and beyond—across no man's land, to a large British force that will, unless word gets through, be led into a trap and wiped out. On the one hand, Sam Mendes's film is a highly convincing welter of dirt, exhaustion, and decay; on the other, the plot requires that our heroes undergo a series of challenges and scene changes so unrelenting (and so far from the tedium of war) as to verge on the implausible. The movie is assisted by a steady supply of dependable British actors, including Colin Firth and Benedict Cumberbatch, and the cinematographer is Roger Deakins, who sustains the illusion that the entire tale unfolds in a single, sinuous take.—*A.L.* (In wide release.)

Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker

In this final installment of the Skywalker cycle, the remnants of the Resistance reunite to do battle once more—with the evil First Order and with their own inner conflicts. Unfortunately, the cinematic framework in which they do so is narrow and numbing. Rey (Daisy Ridley) leads a cell of warriors, including Poe Dameron (Oscar Isaac), Finn (John Boyega), Chewbacca, and the droids C-3PO and BB-8, on a mission to capture the reanimated Emperor Palpatine (Ian McDiarmid), who is trying to entice Rey and Kylo Ren (Adam Driver)—the estranged son of Han Solo (Harrison Ford) and Leia Organa (Carrie Fisher)—to join forces with him and restore the reign of the Sith. The mission involves an absurd pileup of side ventures that are notable mainly for a few touches of grandiose design. The director, J. J. Abrams, stages the thudding action gracelessly and has the actors deliver their greeting-card dialogue with monotonous gravity. The film's dominant element is John Williams's relentless music, which coats the drama with emotional uniformity.—*Richard Brody* (In wide release.)

There Was a Father

This wartime drama by Yasujiro Ozu, from 1942, places family life in the crosswinds of political history and social norms. The widower Shuhei Horikawa (Chishu Ryu), a teacher, struggles to raise his young son, Ryohei (Shuji Sano), after quitting his job—one of his students has died in an accident on a class trip, and Shuhei blames himself. He takes refuge in a small town and sends Ryohei to boarding school; then he finds work in distant Tokyo and sees his son even less. Ozu deftly telescopes time to show the grown Ryohei, also a teacher, posted far from Tokyo and yearning to see his father. Within this melodramatic schema, Ozu highlights the weight of tradition and of duty that crushes the individual spirit. In chilling details, such as Shuhei's eager anticipation of Ryohei's military service and Ryohei's serene lessons on the destructive power of TNT, Ozu reveals a society heading blindly toward the abyss—and destroying its future in the name of the past. In Japanese.—*R.B.* (*Anthology Film Archives*, Jan. 10-11, and streaming.)

IN REVIVAL



The annual MOMA series “To Save and Project,” featuring recently completed restorations, is a reliable source of major rediscoveries. This year's edition (Jan. 9-22) includes a program of short films by **Leo Hurwitz** (screening on Jan. 13 and Jan. 18) that reflect the crucial connection between technical progress and aesthetic imagination. In the early fifties, nearly a decade before the rise of *cinéma vérité*, Hurwitz used a new kind of camera that recorded synch sound to make a pair of documentaries that he called, in the credits, “reality films”; they live up to that lofty billing. “Emergency Ward” (pictured above), filmed in St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village, offers joltingly intimate long takes that depict high-pressure situations ranging from minor wounds to mortal crises. In “The Young Fighter,” a fledgling boxer struggles to balance his training, his day job, and his family life. Both films reach far beyond their nominal subjects to present a sort of anthropology on the wing—a living history of gestures, inflections, and mores.—*Richard Brody*

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TABLES FOR TWO

Claudia's

39 Bushwick Ave., Brooklyn

Ix

43 Lincoln Rd., Brooklyn

In Guatemala, there's a common saying, "*A falta de pan, tortilla*," which translates literally to "In the absence of bread, tortilla," and means, figuratively, "If you can't get the best thing, take the next best thing." It's a snobbish and outdated aphorism, referring to a vestigial hierarchy of carbohydrates, to a time in which tortillas were eaten primarily by the country's indigenous population and associated with poverty. Today, everyone in Guatemala eats tortillas, and, in any definition of the nation's cuisine, they figure quite prominently—certainly more so than bread.

You'll find tortillas at Claudia's, in East Williamsburg, which was, until recently, a more casual café called C.Lo; its owners, the siblings Claudia and Mario Lopez, rebranded it as a full-service Guatemalan restaurant, with an expanded menu and new folk-art-inspired wall murals and upholstery. For a satisfying dish called *tortillas montadas*, small, thick,

slightly sweet ones, blistered on a hot griddle, are smeared with smashed avocado, then piled high with a stewy scoop of carnitas, a shaggy hunk of brisket, or a spoonful of black beans and a generous segment of sweet plantain.

You'll find bread at Claudia's, too: each of the restaurant's tamales comes with a tiny Hawaiian-style sweet roll, in addition to pickled red onion and jalapeño, and, at breakfast or brunch, a fried egg. Both are house-made, but the bun pales in comparison to the excellent tamal, which starts, of course, the way a tortilla does: with masa, a dough made from ground nixtamalized corn mixed with lard and water. For the tamal, the dense, starchy dough is steamed in a banana leaf, along with a bit of carnitas, brisket, or vegetables, a green olive or two, and a few capers—a perfect package on its own.

Masa shines at Claudia's in several other dishes as well. For the *huevos antigüa*, it's steamed and sliced into thick rounds, two per order, each topped with a fried egg, mashed avocado, shards of chicharrón, red onion, and a splash of zesty *chirmol*, a traditional salsa made of charred tomatoes coarsely chopped with raw onion and mint. For a savory pastry called a *doblada*, it's formed into a folded half-moon, like an empanada, stuffed with meat or vegetables, and deep-fried until its surface is bubbly.

The rest of the menu tends not to distinguish itself, with a few exceptions. The chile relleno is fantastic, a butter-milk-battered poblano pepper with a

lacy crisp exterior, filled with sofrito and vegetables and finished with a concentrated tomato sauce. The pollo campero, a crunchy filet of fried chicken served with a scoop of macaroni salad, is a respectable nod to Pollo Campero, the KFC of Guatemala, and you could do much worse than the churrasco, or skirt steak, which has a short-order simplicity, especially if you get it with yucca fries.

It's disappointing, particularly in wintertime, that Claudia's stews, an integral category of Guatemalan cuisine, are sadly bland and thin, lacking in heart and in flavor. Luckily, there's another Guatemalan restaurant in Brooklyn that more than fills this gap: Ix, which opened in 2016, in Prospect-Lefferts Gardens.

You could warm yourself up here without even setting foot through the door, by ordering a cup of sweet spiced cacao, or cocoa, from a takeout window that opens onto the street. (Some believe Guatemala to be the birthplace of chocolate.) But true nourishment awaits inside, in steaming bowls born of ancient Mayan recipes. The ruddy tomato-based *hilachas* features hearty shreds of brisket, creamy chunks of carrot and potato, green beans, and rice. The green *jocón* pairs the same vegetables with chicken instead of beef, and bathes them in a complexly layered broth, bright with tomatillo and cilantro. On the side: a wedge of lime, a bit of chopped raw onion, and, best of all, fresh tortillas. (*Claudia's dishes \$6–\$14. Ix dishes \$7–\$13.*)

—Hannah Goldfield

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT DON'T WAIT

Last week, thousands of people in the Australian state of Victoria were urged to evacuate their homes. “Don’t wait,” the alert warned. Bushfires were burning across the state; so large were some of the blazes that, according to Victoria’s commissioner of emergency management, they were “punching into the atmosphere” with columns of smoke nine miles high. The smoke columns were producing their own weather, generating lightning that, in turn, was setting more fires. Some time after residents received the evacuation warning, many of those in the most seriously affected region, East Gippsland, which is a popular tourist destination, received another alert. It was now too late to leave: “You are in danger and need to act immediately to survive.”

Just to the north of Victoria, in New South Wales, blazes have so far destroyed more than nine million acres. Meanwhile, in the state of South Australia, dozens of fires were burning last week, some of them uncontrollably. At least nineteen people have died in the fires, as have hundreds of millions of animals, including a significant proportion of the country’s koalas. More than two hundred and fifty thousand people signed a petition arguing that, in light of the devastation, Sydney’s famous New Year’s Eve fireworks displays should be scrapped, but the celebration proceeded anyway, in part at the insistence of the Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison.

“I can think of no better time to express to the world just how optimistic and positive we are as a country,” said Morrison, a Donald Trump-like figure who was on holiday with his family in Hawaii last month when, owing to all the fires, New South Wales declared a state of emergency. (It declared a second state of emergency last Thursday, ahead of what was expected to be another catastrophic weekend.)

In a Dantean sort of way, Australia’s holiday-season infernos provided a fitting close to 2019, which has been called “the year the world woke up to the climate crisis.” In India this past summer, a heat wave killed more than a hundred people in the northeastern state of Bihar, and in Japan a month later a heat wave sent an estimated eighteen thousand to the hospital. All-time temperature records were set in France, where a high

of a hundred and eight degrees was reached in the town of Vérargues on June 28th, and in Germany, where the mercury in the town of Lingen hit a hundred and seven degrees on July 25th.

In Australia, records were broken only to be rebroken. On December 17th, maximum temperatures across the entire country, which is roughly the size of the continental United States, averaged 105.6 degrees. Then, on December 18th, they climbed to 107.4 degrees. The “feeling when you open the oven door” is how one Australian described the heat to the BBC. “It’s like that, but just the whole time.” Globally, it was the second- or third-warmest year since accurate measurements began. (The exact ranking is still to be calculated.) In either case, each of the past five years has been among the hottest five, and the decade counts as the warmest ten-year stretch on record. If 2019 was supposedly the year we “woke up to the climate crisis,” the twenty-tens have been called “the decade we finally woke up to climate change.”

What will the twenty-twenties bring? In geophysical terms, this question is almost too easy to answer. Temperatures will continue to rise. It’s virtually guaranteed that the coming decade will be warmer than the twenty-tens, which were warmer than the two-thousands, which were warmer than the nineteen-nineties, which—you guessed it—were warmer than the nineteen-eighties.

And with still higher temperatures will come still greater damage. Droughts will grow more punishing. (Australia’s



horrific wildfires are, in large part, the result of what Australians are calling a “big dry,” which is now in its third year and has forced many towns to truck in water.) Warmer air holds more moisture, so the flip side of drought is deluge. (Last week, as Australia was roasting, flooding in Indonesia killed at least forty people.) Meanwhile, the planet’s ice sheets will continue to melt, leading to ever-higher sea levels, as will the Arctic ice cap. It’s possible that by 2030 the Arctic Ocean will be ice-free at the end of the summer.

Which brings us to the question of what it means to “wake up.” If in the past year (or the past decade) the world began to understand how dangerous climate change is, it certainly didn’t act like it. In the past ten years, more CO₂ was emitted than in all of human history up to the election of J.F.K.

In 2015, in Paris, world leaders, in-

cluding President Barack Obama, committed to holding the average global temperature increase to “well below 2°C.” They never committed to how they were going to do this, however, and last month, in Madrid, the creaky machinery of climate diplomacy came very close to breaking down altogether. The Trump Administration, which has filed to withdraw the United States from the Paris agreement, and the Morrison government, which wanted to use an accounting trick to fulfill its Paris commitments, were explicitly blamed for the stalemate. Many commentators noted the irony of the situation. A headline in the *Guardian* put it this way: “AUSTRALIA TOOK A MATCH TO UNCLIMATE TALKS WHILE BACK HOME THE COUNTRY BURNED.”

Every decade is consequential in its own way, but the twenty-twenties will be consequential in a more or less per-

manent way. Global CO₂ emissions are now so high—in 2019, they hit a new record of forty-three billion metric tons—that ten more years of the same will be nothing short of cataclysmic. Unless emissions are reduced, and radically, a rise of two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) will be pretty much unavoidable by 2030. This will make the demise of the world’s coral reefs, the inundation of most low-lying island nations, incessant heat waves and fires and misery for millions—perhaps billions—of people equally unavoidable.

Really waking up, and not just dreaming to ourselves that things will be O.K., has become urgent—beyond urgent, in fact. To paraphrase Victoria’s fire authority: The world is in danger, and we need to act immediately to survive.

—Elizabeth Kolbert

THE BOARDS BACK TO SCHOOL



When six Columbia University graduate students arrived at their creative-writing seminar one recent Tuesday, they encountered an unlikely classmate. The actress Mary-Louise Parker, who is starring in Adam Rapp’s Broadway play “The Sound Inside,” had been invited to sit in by their professor, the writer Leslie Jamison. The women met four years ago, when Jamison interviewed Parker at Symphony Space about her memoir, “Dear Mr. You,” a series of epistolary vignettes dedicated to the men in her life. The two became friends, and Parker was one of the first people to receive a galley of Jamison’s 2018 book, “The Recovering,” a literary history of sobriety. She read it twice. “I was obsessed with it. I am obsessed with it,” Parker said.

Parker would like to write another book, but she’s been blocked. “And I’ve been craning away from the personal,” she explained to Jamison, “because I felt that everything I wrote was seen through the lens of ‘actress writing.’”

Instead of writing, these days Parker stands onstage eight times a week and delivers a monologue about writing. In “The Sound Inside,” she plays a character named Bella Lee Baird, who sounds a lot like Jamison—a middle-aged creative-writing professor at an Ivy League college. (“In my mind, I’m actually Leslie Jamison,” Parker said.) In the play, Baird discovers that she has terminal stomach cancer. As she grapples with the diagnosis, she fixates on a student named Christopher Dunn, who boasts in class that he will one day write as well as Dostoyevsky.

The students in Jamison’s workshop were huddled at a rectangular wooden table in Dodge Hall. The seminar had the dozy air common to classes that take place right after lunch—the fluorescent lights buzzing, the smell of burned coffee and wintergreen gum. Parker sat at one end, wearing a black sweater and tortoiseshell glasses. On her right sat Jamison in a maroon polka-dot dress.

Parker tried to put the students at ease. “Acting is so similar to writing in so many ways,” she said. “I don’t know if I’m the greatest actress or anything, but I’m a really good dramaturge. I can tell a structure, and I can tell where there’s a flaw.”

Jamison asked the students to discuss their thesis projects. Yoshiko Iwai

explained that she got into writing through modern dance. She was working on some essays about “death rituals” and was interested in “the way we write the body.” She wants to get an M.D. after her M.F.A.

“You’re going to go to med school?” Parker asked, her eyes wide.

Next up was David Garczynski, who had bushy eyebrows and slight stubble. “Yeah, so, um, Yoshiko’s a tough act to follow,” he said. He told Parker that he was writing essays about climate change



Mary-Louise Parker and
Leslie Jamison

on the part of Long Island where he is from. “I wanted to talk about this idea of home as a place I never want to return to.”

“You never want to return?” Parker asked. “And yet your writing is all centered around it.”

“I’m not that exciting,” Garczynski said. Parker shot him a look.

“Don’t give me that face,” he scoffed. The students seemed to hold their breath, until Parker shot back, “But, seriously, who *is* interesting?”

Jamison cut in. “I was encouraging David to bring in more of the personal narrative.” Garczynski nodded.

“I’m totally fascinated now,” Parker said. “Like, you went red hot.”

Maria Allocco, who was drinking kombucha, continued the introductions. “My father was an Italian Catholic priest when he fell in love with my mother in South Korea,” she said briskly. “They eloped and were disowned by their families. I write mixed-genre pieces on mixed-race experience. And I write through lenses of feminism, and also about fluidity and allyship.” She said her writing was informed by silent-meditation retreats; she has attended seven of them.

At the end of class, Parker told the students that she wished she could audit the course. “I’m a crazy nerd,” she said. “I memorize poems. In my dressing room backstage are all these poems. Just this morning, I left a haiku on my son’s bed to remind him to clean the panini maker.”

The class laughed, so Parker decided to share her work. With a small smirk, she recited:

He forgot my bath.
Ashamed, I wait for his touch.
Young hands, soaping me.

—Rachel Syme

LOS ANGELES POSTCARD LET IT SNOW



It was a sweltering L.A. day in 1945 when Mel Tormé and Robert Wells cranked out the line “Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose.” On a recent holi-



“Wow! From up here you can see everything.”

day Saturday, the sun was shining as a crew of men in waterproof gear filed up a driveway in Studio City to build a sledding hill. The team, led by a former magician named Adam Williams, had brought shovels, fir trees, a dumpster-size ice crusher, and twenty-two tons’ worth of ice blocks. Williams, who is forty-three, with brown hair and a blinding smile, gives off the self-assured vibe of a yoga instructor. But he seemed anxious as one of the giant trucks filled with ice backed up noisily, skirting an expensively manicured lawn. “Sometimes half the work is just getting into position,” he said, gesturing toward the twisting gated driveway.

Williams’s company, MagicSnow, arranges “interactive snow experiences” in such high-S.P.F. locales as Malaysia, Brazil, Barbados, Hawaii, and Southern California. (In November, he made it snow over the Santa Monica Pier.) When the producers of “The Bachelor” need a blizzard, or

if John Legend wants flurries onstage at a concert, they call Williams, whose fee ranges from ten thousand to a hundred thousand dollars.

“It’s the goal of the magician to create something out of nothing,” he said. Business is highly seasonal. “That’s the struggle at the moment,” he added. “We do a year’s worth of work in six weeks.” That day, Williams had six gigs. At a house in the Hollywood Hills, his trucks hadn’t been able to fit in the entranceway, so his crew had had to shovel the snow into wheelbarrows and then wheel it up to the property.

The host of the sledding party was a sitcom producer. In his driveway, a big metal ramp, like a fairground super slide, stood next to the pool, waiting for its blanket of pulverized ice. Workers scurried around, hanging lights and setting up a d.j. booth, a doughnut machine, a hot-chocolate dispenser, and a tent for “aura portraiture.” The Magic-Snow crew switched on the crusher’s tractor engine and fed ice blocks the

size of photocopiers down a chute into the machine's metal maw. On a past gig, a pair of giant ice tongs fell into the machine and jammed up the gears. A backup crusher (Williams owns four) was rushed over.

Once the crusher was full, it was time to make snow. An employee pressed a button, and a fellow crew member, named Jake Montiel, gripped a long black hose as a surge of white streamed out in a fifteen-foot plume toward the sledding ramp. The hose shook violently and Montiel struggled to keep it steady. At one point, a chunk clogged the flow. "This always happens," Williams said, as Montiel pummeled the hose with a sledgehammer, breaking down the blockage. Jessica Goldklang, a party planner, crouched nearby and recorded the spectacle on her phone, while icy spray grazed some carefully potted citrus trees. In forty-five minutes, the twenty-two tons of ice coated the driveway and the ramp, a modest spread of white. Williams admitted to being disappointed that the client had opted for a static snow scene rather than also ask for the company's signature snowfall effect. (This involves a secret "water-and-foam-based method.")

The crew began to carve sledding lanes into the hill. Then they brought in the fir trees, scattered pinecones around, and got to work on two snowmen. Instead of employing the classic method of rolling a snowball along the ground to make a larger and larger sphere, they packed snow into plastic molds, producing pristine, stackable globes of white. "Adam doesn't like them too perfect," Montiel said, giving one of them a few dings. He fashioned eyes and a mouth with shards of spray-painted lava rock that he had in his pocket, and popped on a nose. ("We prefer a *natural* carrot to a more uniform one," Williams said.)

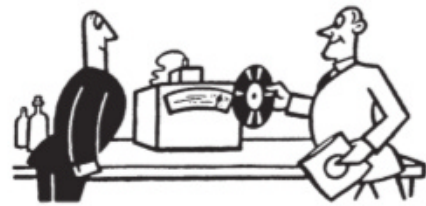
An hour later, guests started arriving. "Real snow!" a little girl cried, stepping onto the ramp. As the adults drank cocktails on the lawn, kids took runs down the hill. "Is it safe?" one child asked, positioning herself on a metal sled. "Eww! It's wet." A snowball fight began, and soon a little boy ran to his mother in furious tears. One of the MagicSnow guys shook his head and

said, "That's the kind of crying you do when you wanna get another kid in trouble."

On Monday, a crew would scrape off the ramp and truck it away. The snow gets left behind. Eventually, in a simple disappearing act, it melts.

—Brent Crane

SCAVENGING DEPT. STACKS



Almost all art, even a lot of the good stuff, is ephemeral: toil, creation, then oblivion. Take the 1974 suspense film "Juggernaut," starring Anthony Hopkins and Omar Sharif. It's not "Casablanca," but it's a neat little thriller. Remember "Juggernaut"? Of course you don't. And if Omar Sharif's work can fade into obscurity what hope remains for everyone else?

On his new album, "Our Pathetic Age," Josh Davis, the musical artist known as DJ Shadow, offered some hope for everyone else (and for Omar Sharif). Midway through the album is a song made entirely out of four words from "Juggernaut," modulated, tweaked, and repeated over and over. Davis is the godfather of sampling: layering bits of song and sounds atop bits of other songs and sounds to make an original work—a musical collage. One song on his 1996 album, "Endtroducing," is car-



DJ Shadow

ried by a piano riff he found on a 1970 album by an unknown messianic rabbi/pianist, paced by percussion from a high-school-band record.

"If it's got quality, even if it takes twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty years, eventually it'll get its place in the sun," Davis said the other day. "D.j.s, they kind of right the balance over time." He was sleuthing through the archives of music and recorded sound at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, where, perhaps, his latest work of resurrection lay hidden among the private collection of Lou Reed, the boxes of Korean folk music, or a recording made at a convention of mobile-home dealers in Kentucky. He was outfitted as an urban archeologist: rain jacket, backpack, San Francisco Giants hat, and the air of someone who's made enough discoveries to know not to expect one.

Davis was accompanied by Jonathan Hiam, the archive's curator, who had long black hair and wore a green suede blazer. As Hiam showed him around, Davis pulled out a few sleeves. One was a 1987 album, produced by Chocolate Mama Records, by Ron Seagram, who's described on the cover as the "Sophisticated Soul Man." "You can tell by his cool glasses," Davis said. He kept it for later.

The archives live in rows and rows of shelving in the basement of the library, at Lincoln Center. The eight hundred thousand albums, cylinder recordings, and snippets of spoken word make up a great deal of the history of recorded music, and recorded sound in general. Perusing the space at random, one is reminded that it's not so easy to find the quality. Most music that gets recorded, with a few notable exceptions—Cher, early Weezer, Lizzo—is bad. "I'm known for championing certain artists that maybe didn't get the amount of attention they should have," Davis said. "But sometimes it's a challenge to literally just find a record, stop, and then do something with it. Sometimes you can get incredible things. Sometimes you can waste four hours."

Hiam said, "Last night, my colleague Jessica found all these Donny Osmond albums in German." Davis looked unmoved. *Nein, danke*, Herr Osmond.

The search continued. An album called “Farmer’s Daughter,” by a band called the Keyes, which had collaborated with Brian Wilson, looked promising. Davis nabbed it.

A few years ago, Davis’s collection numbered sixty thousand records. He also has lots of CDs, but, for him, there is something about analog. He picked up a record in the acetate section and sniffed.

“Palmitic acid,” Hiam said. It smelled like an old library. *Ahh.*

“My friend and I wanted to make a cologne called Acetate for Men,” Davis said.

Digital may smell like burned royalties, but it doesn’t take up space. The library staff calculated that each foot of shelved lacquer records weighs a hundred and sixteen pounds—roughly, one Prince per foot. The shelves are movable, opening and closing with a giant crank. Hiam gave the crank a turn. The corridor where Davis had just stood began to close, like the trash compactor in “Star Wars.”

“I was in a record-store basement in Sacramento once, and the records were stacked in pillars,” Davis said. “Eight feet high. I was going through a stack, and the weight of a bunch of pillars started to shift against me, and, for a moment, I thought, Oh, that’s the end.”

Davis grabbed a final record, a band-camp recording from 1972. Then he retreated to the safety of the playback room, a space stuffed with ancient record players, VCRs, and reel-to-reel tape decks. “The guy who fixes them goes by the name Midnight Bob,” Hiam said. “Fixes stuff all over the city. He’s got a mullet and a mesh muscle shirt.”

A technician played Davis’s picks. The Keyes were a dud. The Sophisticated Soul Man delivered some decent adult contemporary. But it was a weird vibe—old-person sexy.

Band camp was the final hope. When the needle dropped, a delicate choral arrangement purred. Davis looked intrigued. “You can take a split second of these voices and turn it into a symphony,” he said.

The chorus began singing, softly, “Hallelujah!”

—Zach Helfand

SKETCHPAD BY OLIVIA DE RECAT

Which Doomed New Year’s Resolution Are You?



OdR

WORLD WITHOUT PAIN

Does hurting make us human?

BY ARIEL LEVY



We like to think that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger, or more resilient, or . . . something. Deeper. Wiser. Enlarged. There is "glory in our sufferings," the Bible promises. "Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." In this equation, no pain is too great to be good. "The darker the night, the brighter the stars," Dostoyevsky wrote. "The deeper the grief, the closer is God!" We atheists get in on the action by insisting that the agony of loss elucidates the worth of love. The hours spent staring into the dark, looping around our own personal grand prix of anxieties, are not a waste of time but

a fundamental expression of our humanity. And so on. To be a person is to suffer.

But what if our worst feelings are just vestigial garbage? Hypervigilance and pricking fear were useful when survival depended on evading lions; they are not particularly productive when the predators are Alzheimer's and cancer. Other excruciating feelings, like consuming sadness and aching regret, may never have had a function in the evolutionary sense. But religion, art, literature, and Oprah have convinced us that they are valuable—the bitter kick that enhances life's intermittent sweetness. Pain is what makes joy,

gratitude, mercy, hilarity, and empathy so precious. Unless it isn't.

"I know the word 'pain,' and I know people are *in* pain, because you can see it," Joanne Cameron, a seventy-two-year-old retired teacher, told me, in the cluttered kitchen of her century-old stone cottage in the Scottish Highlands. Cameron has never experienced the extremes of rage, dread, grief, anxiety, or fear. She handed a cup of tea to Jim, her husband of twenty-five years, with whom she's never had a fight. "I see stress," she continued, "and I've seen pain, what it does, but I'm talking about an abstract thing."

Because of a combination of genetic quirks, Cameron's negative emotional range is limited to the kinds of bearable suffering one sees in a Nora Ephron movie. If someone tells Cameron a sad story, she cries—"easily! Oh, I'm such a softie." When she reads about the latest transgression by Boris Johnson or Donald Trump, she feels righteous indignation. "But then you just go to a protest march, don't you? And that's all you can do." When something bad happens, Cameron's brain immediately searches for a way to ameliorate the situation, but it does not dwell on unhappiness. She inadvertently follows the creed of the Stoics (and of every twelve-step recovery program): Accept the things you cannot change.

Cameron, who has white hair and was wearing denim overalls over a purple striped shirt, has a bouncy, elfin energy. She described the closest she'd ever come to experiencing real terror: an incident when her son, Jeremy, a musician, was beaten up so badly at a gig that he had to be hospitalized. "He was defending someone," Cameron said. "The lead singer was gay—we're talking a good few years ago, when they weren't quite as tolerated—and they started calling the gay chappie names, and then suddenly the whole lot of them came on top of Jeremy."

"They punched him, and kicked him, stamped his head," Jim, a tall, genial man, with a white beard and a thick brogue, added gravely.

When Cameron got the call, she remembers, "initially, I thought, Oh, God, I hope he doesn't die—I felt that. Then we got in the car. I wasn't fretting, I was just thinking, *We've got to*

Joanne Cameron experiences suffering mostly as "an abstract thing."

get to him, he needs me.” They drove a hundred and thirty miles on the single-track roads that wind east from their home in Foyers, near the snaky banks of Loch Ness, to Peterhead. “We got to the hospital about four or five in the morning. He looked like an elephant man, my handsome boy did,” Cameron said, laughing. “He looked like nothing on earth!”

In addition to Jeremy, who is forty-two, Cameron has a daughter, Amy, who is thirty. Her experience of motherhood has entailed none of the rumbling terror that most parents feel over their children’s safety. “Some time ago, someone said to me, ‘When the baby comes, the first thing you do is count the fingers and toes.’ I thought, I never looked at anything!” Cameron said. “I never dreamed of there being anything wrong.”

In sharp contrast to her near-inability to feel awful, Cameron has an expansive capacity for positive emotions. She is exceedingly loving and affectionate with her husband. When I first came to the door, she greeted me with an embrace, crying, “Ooh, I’m very huggy!” Her seventeen years as a special-education teacher required great reserves of compassion. “I had a Down-syndrome girl—who was actually quite high-functioning—and she would come in every morning and she’d walk up to me and spit in my face, and say, ‘I hate you, Jo Cameron! I hate you!’ And I’d stand there and say, ‘I don’t like being spat on, but I don’t hate you!’” Cameron told me, smiling. “Oh, I’ve had some very difficult students. I’ve been bitten; I’ve been spat on; I’ve been kicked!” Over the years, the Camerons have provided short-term foster care for four children. One of them stole all their vacation money from the cookie jar. “She did take things for the sake of taking them,” Cameron said pleasantly. “It took us years to catch up! When eight hundred pounds is gone from your vacation kitty, it takes a long time to recoup.”

Even seemingly sorrowful things, like the loss of her mother a year ago, can fill Cameron with appreciation and pleasure. “My mother’s death was the least saddest thing ever,” Cameron declared. “She used to say, ‘I’ve had the most wonderful life.’ And she died after she had an iced lolly and went to sleep.”

When the doctor arrived, Cameron recalled, “she said, ‘Don’t take this the wrong way, but that’s the most beautiful corpse I’ve ever seen.’ Then we sat in the kitchen and had a fantastic wake: we toasted Mum with Tia Maria till the early morning.”

Cameron plans to leave her own corpse to science when she dies. “They’ll whisk the body away, and stick us in a drawer somewhere and chop us up, won’t they?” she said. “I don’t mind.” She will also spend a good deal of her remaining time alive being studied by scientists, who hope that her genetics will provide a path to new treatments for anxiety and trauma, as well as for pain management and healing. In addition to her unusual emotional composition, Cameron is entirely insensitive to physical pain. As a child, she fell and hurt her arm while roller-skating, but had no idea she’d broken it until her mother noticed that it was hanging strangely. Giving birth was no worse. “When I was having Jeremy, it was the height of everyone doing natural childbirths,” she said. “My friends would come up to me and say, ‘Don’t listen—it’s murder. If you’re in pain, take everything they give you.’ I went in thinking, As soon as it gets painful, I’ll ask for the drugs. But it was over before I knew it.”

Remarkably, Cameron didn’t realize that she was any different from other people until she was sixty-five. “Lots of people have high pain thresholds,” she said. “I didn’t think people were silly for crying. I could tell people were upset or hurt and stuff. I went through life and I just thought, I haven’t hurt myself as much as they have.”

Devjit Srivastava was an officer in the Indian Navy for a decade—an experience that taught him to stay cool under pressure. Composure is also important in his current job, which is unpredictable and high-stakes: Srivastava is the consultant anesthetist at what he calls a “frontier hospital”—Raigmore, in Inverness, which serves the whole of the vast and remote Scottish Highlands. His first day on call, he was pulled into a helicopter to help with a “field amputation” on a farmer who had got caught in a thresher.

When Srivastava met Jo Cameron,

six years ago, she told him that she wouldn’t need painkillers for the surgery she was about to undergo. He assumed that he was just dealing with a kindred imperturbable spirit. “The Scottish are known to be stoic people,” Srivastava said, drinking coffee in the bustling hospital cafeteria. “I thought, She’s just trying to tell me she can tolerate pain very well. And, actually, it’s a busy list, and we have to crack on.”

Cameron was having a trapeziectomy, an operation to remove a small bone at the base of the thumb joint. Though her hands never hurt, they’d become so deformed by arthritis that she couldn’t hold a pen properly. She’d had a similar experience with her hip, which had recently been replaced; it didn’t hurt, but her family noticed that she wasn’t walking normally. She saw her local doctor about it several times, but the first question was always “How much pain are you in?” And the answer was always “None.” (“The third time I was there I think they figured, ‘We’ll just take an X-ray to shut this woman up,’” Cameron told me. “Then the X-ray came in and it was really bad. Everything was all distorted and mangled and crumbling. He said, ‘Wow. This has got to be done.’”)

Srivastava told Cameron that, Scottish stoicism notwithstanding, he intended to use an anesthetic block during the operation. After she left the hospital, he reviewed her chart: “She had only one paracetamol”—a Tylenol—“immediately after the operation in the recovery area. And that was only because the nurses give everybody a paracetamol after surgery. I checked the full records of hip replacement the previous year: after hip surgery it was the same thing—nothing taken for pain. That’s when I called her in.”

He remained slightly skeptical until Cameron let him perform a maneuver that anesthesiologists use on patients who are having difficulty regaining consciousness after sedation: they press hard on the inner edges of the eye sockets, and the pain shocks people awake. Cameron, of course, felt only pressure.

Srivastava was surprised that no doctor or nurse had been curious about her pain insensitivity before. (Cameron told me that she didn’t think it was particularly notable: “They’ve got so

many people demanding their attention, screaming—*they're* the ones you focus on.”) Srivastava recognized that her case was extraordinary—“This doesn’t fall into every anesthetist’s life,” he said—and also that understanding it would require him to supplement his own expertise. He developed a research protocol, and enlisted highly regarded scientists from around the world to try to figure out what caused her condition.

Cameron is beguiled by the idea that she can help alleviate others’ suffering—she remembers the terrible migraines that tormented her mother. Her father, however, was pain-free. “I never saw him take an aspirin,” Cameron said. “I’m convinced he was the same as me, because I never heard my father complaining about any pain, ever. He died suddenly, of a brain hemorrhage—I think other people would have had a warning.” She continued, “He was the kindest man you’ll ever meet. Every morning he’d wake us with a cup of tea and a carrot from the garden and tell us a poem.” Then he’d accompany Cameron to school, hand in hand and skipping all the way.

The scientists who took on Jo Cameron’s case were working in a young field. Geneticists have been studying congenital insensitivity to pain only since the nineteen-nineties. In that time, several hundred cases have been reported; presumably there are others, but no one knows how many. The condition is almost always caused by neuropathy, an interruption in the transmission of painful sensation along nerve fibres. People with severe congenital neuropathy tend to die young, because they injure themselves so frequently and severely. (Without pain, children are in constant danger. They swallow something burning hot, the esophagus ruptures, bacteria spill into the internal organs, and terminal sepsis sets in. They break their necks roughhousing. To protect some patients, doctors have removed all their teeth to prevent them from chewing off their tongues and bleeding to death.) There are also people whose neurons stop working, as the result of a disease: syphilis, lupus, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis.

In recent years, advances in genetic

science have made it possible to link particular variants of pain insensitivity to mutations in specific genes. Six members of the Marsili family in Italy, for instance, share a mutation in the gene *ZFHX2*; consequently, they rarely sweat, experience pain only fleetingly, and are completely insensitive to heat. “We live a very normal life, perhaps better than the rest of the population,” Letizia Marsili, the matriarch of the family, said in 2017. (She once broke her shoulder while skiing in the Italian alps; she continued skiing without any pain for the rest of the afternoon, and got around to seeing a doctor only days later, when it was convenient.) There are downsides, though, to what’s been named Marsili syndrome. Letizia’s mother suffered multiple fractures in her youth without noticing them; her bones were never set properly, and they healed awry.

In 2006, Geoff Woods, a geneticist at Cambridge, published his findings on members of several families in a remote region of northern Pakistan, who share a mutation in the gene *SCN9A*, which renders them both pain-free and unable to process smell. (Since then, people with the same mutation have been identified all over the world, but the Pakistani patients were an ideal group to study: they were all the products of cousin-to-cousin marriages, making their gene pool unusually easy to map.) “The lack of a sense of smell



is really helpful, because it provides us with a simple question we can ask new patients,” James Cox, a former researcher of Woods’s who is now a prominent geneticist at University College London, said. Cox has been studying Cameron’s DNA for five years, and has co-authored a paper with Srivastava about her case, which was published last March, in the *British Journal of Anaesthesia*. “Jo is quite unique,” he said.

Cameron does not have neuropa-

thy: she can feel all the sensations the rest of us do, except pain. The most striking difference between her and everyone else is the way she processes endocannabinoids—chemicals that exist naturally in every human brain. Endocannabinoids mitigate our stress response, and they bind to the same receptors as the THC in the kind of cannabis you smoke. Normally, they are broken down by an enzyme called fatty acid amide hydrolase, or *FAAH*. But Cameron has a mutation on her *FAAH* gene that makes the enzyme less effective—so her endocannabinoids build up. She has extraordinarily high levels of one in particular: anandamide, whose name is derived from the Sanskrit word for “bliss.”

About a third of the population has a mutation in the *FAAH* gene, which provides increased levels of anandamide. “That phenotype—low levels of anxiety, forgetfulness, a happy-go-lucky demeanor—isn’t representative of how *everyone* responds to cannabis, but you see a lot of the prototypical changes in them that occur when people consume cannabis,” said Matthew Hill, a biologist at the University of Calgary’s Hotchkiss Brain Institute, who was a co-author of the Cameron paper. The *FAAH* gene, like every gene, comes in a pair. People who have the mutation in one allele of the gene seem a little high; people who have it in both even more so. Jo Cameron is fully baked.

“When I met Jo for the first time, I was just struck by her,” Cox, an affable forty-year-old with a scruffy beard, told me, one afternoon in his lab at U.C.L. “She was *very* chatty. Did you notice that?” (It’s hard to miss.) “I said to her, ‘Are you worried about what’s going to happen today?’ Because she was meeting our clinicians to have a skin biopsy and do quantitative sensory testing—pain-threshold tests. She said, ‘No. In fact, I’m never worried about anything.’” Cox told me that it was difficult to get through everything in the time they’d allotted, because Cameron was so friendly and loquacious with the scientists, even as they burned her, stuck her with pins, and pinched her with tweezers until she bled. This imperviousness to pain is what makes her distinct from everyone else with a *FAAH* mutation. They,

like even the most committed stoners, can still get hurt.

Cameron had the same FAAH mutation that many other people have—but there had to be something else at play. The scientists started their inquiry by isolating DNA from her blood, and then analyzing the protein-coding subset of her genome—the part that’s traditionally considered to be significant. “We didn’t really find anything,” Cox said. “So we decided, O.K., why don’t we look across the whole genome for bits that are deleted or duplicated? And, at the time, this new chip was just available, which enabled us to scan the whole genome and look for deletions”—snippets missing from her genetic code. “It was a lucky strike: we found that there was this deletion. But it was distinct from FAAH. It was away from FAAH, just downstream.”

The scientists noticed that the right edge of the deletion overlapped “a gene that was annotated as a pseudogene,” Cox said, and frowned. “Which is a term I don’t like.” A pseudogene is what’s been thought of as genetic detritus—a copy of a gene that’s just sitting there, not doing anything productive. One biochemist I spoke to likened a pseudogene to a rusted-out car you stumble on in the forest—only, in Cameron’s case, they put a key in the ignition and the car turned on. “To call it a pseudogene is misleading, because this is a gene that is expressed—it makes a product, a sequence in the DNA,” Cox said, with excitement. “It’s a real fascinating class of genes which have been severely overlooked in genetics until very recently.” Cox and his colleagues named this particular pseudogene—“It’s nicer to call it a gene,” he insisted—FAAH OUT. “It was a wordplay, really,” he said sheepishly. “The challenge now is to understand what it’s doing. Jo is the first person in the world that we know of with this.”

Cameron’s case is important in genetics, partly because it may supply evidence that pseudogenes are more significant than they were previously thought to be. Moreover, if scientists can replicate her neurochemistry they might be able to develop treatments that alleviate the opioid epidemic. They could potentially treat otherwise in-

tractable anxiety and depression. Perhaps we could all be a little more like Jo Cameron: joyful, compassionate, unperturbed by all the nasty, roiling feelings that turn us, from time to time, into goblins.

I asked Matthew Hill—a renowned expert on cannabinoids and stress—if there was any downside to Cameron’s biology, and he laughed out loud. “Yes! From an evolutionary perspective, it would be tremendously destructive for a species to have that,” he said. Without fear, you drown in waves that you shouldn’t be swimming in; you take late-night strolls in cities that you don’t know; you go to work at a construction site and neglect to put on a hard

hat. “Her phenotype is only beneficial in an environment where there is no danger,” Hill asserted. “If you can’t be concerned about a situation where you’d be at risk of something adverse happening to you, you are more likely to put yourself in one. Anxiety is a highly adaptive process: that’s why every mammalian species exhibits some form of it.”

Unlike other pain-insensitive people, Cameron has made it into her seventies without getting badly hurt. Sometimes she realizes that she’s burning her hand on the stove because she smells singeing; sometimes she cuts herself in the garden and sees that she’s bleeding. But none of that has been severe,



“Think of this as intensive training for being in a can.”



"You're here and you don't have to be. That tells me a lot about you."

and Cameron did raise two children safely into adulthood.

"The human brain is very capable of learning, 'This is what's appropriate to do in this situation,'" Hill said. Cameron's relative cautiousness may have developed imitatively. "And there may not have been that much threat presented to her—she's lived in a rural community in Scotland," he concluded. "Maybe she hasn't had to deal with that much that would physically or emotionally harm her."

Scotland is notorious for "one of the vilest climates under heaven," Robert Louis Stevenson, who was born in Edinburgh, wrote. "The weather is raw and boisterous in winter, shifty and ungenial in summer, and a downright meteorological purgatory in the spring." But the week in autumn when I visited was blissfully sunny. Farmland rolled under a gleaming blue sky for miles around the Camerons' property, green and gold and dotted with sheep.

Behind their cottage, they grow vegetables in little plastic greenhouses, and their chickens peck about in a modest orchard of pears, apples, and plums. "We look after the hens very well," Cameron said. (She is a vegan; her husband is a vegetarian who sometimes indulges in an egg.)

The Camerons "do everything together," Jo said. They make wine, and take weekly trips to Edinburgh to visit Amy; they're in a local theatre troupe, for which Jo is the stage manager. (She doesn't act, because she can't remember the lines. As we were walking through the garden, a pizza was burning in the oven: Cameron had forgotten that she was making one for lunch.) "I love Jim to bits," Cameron said. "He's smashing—I'm so lucky. Having had a marriage before where..." She trailed off, thinking about her previous husband. "I mean, I loved him. But you never knew what you were coming home to."

Cameron's first husband, Phil, died

after a prolonged battle with mental illness. "He'd either be full of fun and laughter, or he'd be so depressed he'd be curled up in the corner in the fetal position," she said. "He was like this—" She mimed a seesaw going violently up and down. "Bipolar."

They met when they were both university students near Birmingham, England, where Cameron grew up. "He was lovely," she said. "But he always had a dark side. He would get down, and I would be the one that would bring him up again. You know, there'd be a game going: 'Oh, it's not that bad, come on.'"

Phil had his first major episode as the family was on its way to a vacation in Sardinia, when Jeremy was little. "He just cracked," Cameron said. "On the plane, all the way there, he was kicking me, pinching me." (It's impossible to say how hard; it didn't hurt.) "We got to the hotel, and I said, 'Can someone please come and help me? My husband is having a breakdown.'" She recalled the difficulty of finding a flight home on short notice, of thinking of an excuse to give Jeremy. "He always had it under control," she said. "But suddenly he couldn't control it." Phil tried a variety of medications and saw several psychiatrists over the years. "I always went to every session," Cameron said. "The last time he went to see somebody, the doctor said to me, 'This is terminal, you know. At some point, he will...' And six months later, sure enough, he did."

I asked Cameron what she felt when the psychiatrist said that. (And I imagined how I would feel: desperate, heart-sick, powerless, distraught.) "I looked at the state he was in, and I thought, 'Maybe it's good,'" she said. Cameron was back at work the day after the funeral. "It sounds cold. But you say to people, 'I'm not being cold! Look, horrible things happen.' I'm not in airy-fairy land. Horrible things are *going* to happen. You have to cope with it. You have to say to yourself, 'I can't help that person.' You help them as much as you can, but when you can't help them anymore, then you have to help everyone else."

Amy was a year old at the time, and Jeremy was thirteen. "We all went to the beach every weekend after Phil

died,” Cameron recalled. “I said to Jeremy, ‘What we’ll do every Sunday is we’ll put Amy in the back of the car, and you get a map’—because he loved maps—and I won’t know where we’re going, just direct me.’ He’d go, ‘Turn left, now turn right, go along here.’ And we’d turn up in all sorts of places, and we’d have Sunday lunch. We had a great time doing that.” Whenever I pressed Cameron for details about a seemingly devastating occurrence, she wasn’t evasive; she was mystifying—always ending up on a lovely memory, via a route so unforeseeable it was as if it, too, were determined by a child with a map.

Cameron began dating Jim, who was teaching science at the time, and had known her late husband from their village chapter of Roundtable, a kind of Scottish Rotary Club. Five years later, they married, and Jim adopted Amy. (Jeremy was already a young adult.) Cameron said of her daughter, “She’s geometrically opposite me. She worries about everything.” From an early age, Amy demonstrated talent as an artist, and her work has been exhibited across Europe. Her portfolio includes sculpture, earthworks, and intricate, realistic drawings, often interspersed with text. In one piece, above the image of a sleeping baby, float the words “feeling/the sacrifice/cut through/and sectioned/kept alive by/these unfortunate animals of emotions—fear, disgust, anger, etc. Odder still people feel nothing.”

Amy finds her mother’s equanimity confounding. “She’ll say, ‘Why can’t you be a normal mom?’” Cameron told me. When Cameron asked, “What’s a normal mom?” Amy replied, “Well, it’s not you. They shout!” Cameron shook her head at the memory. “I sometimes think to myself, I’m being horrible. If someone is really in a rage and really upset, and you’re saying, ‘It’s all right!’, then they get angrier. I can be very annoying—especially when you’re a teenager and you don’t want your problems solved. You just want someone to shout at.”

Paul Bloom, a professor of psychology at Yale and the author of the book “Against Empathy,” maintains that relating to suffering has little to do with the capacity to be helpful and kind. He has published research suggesting that

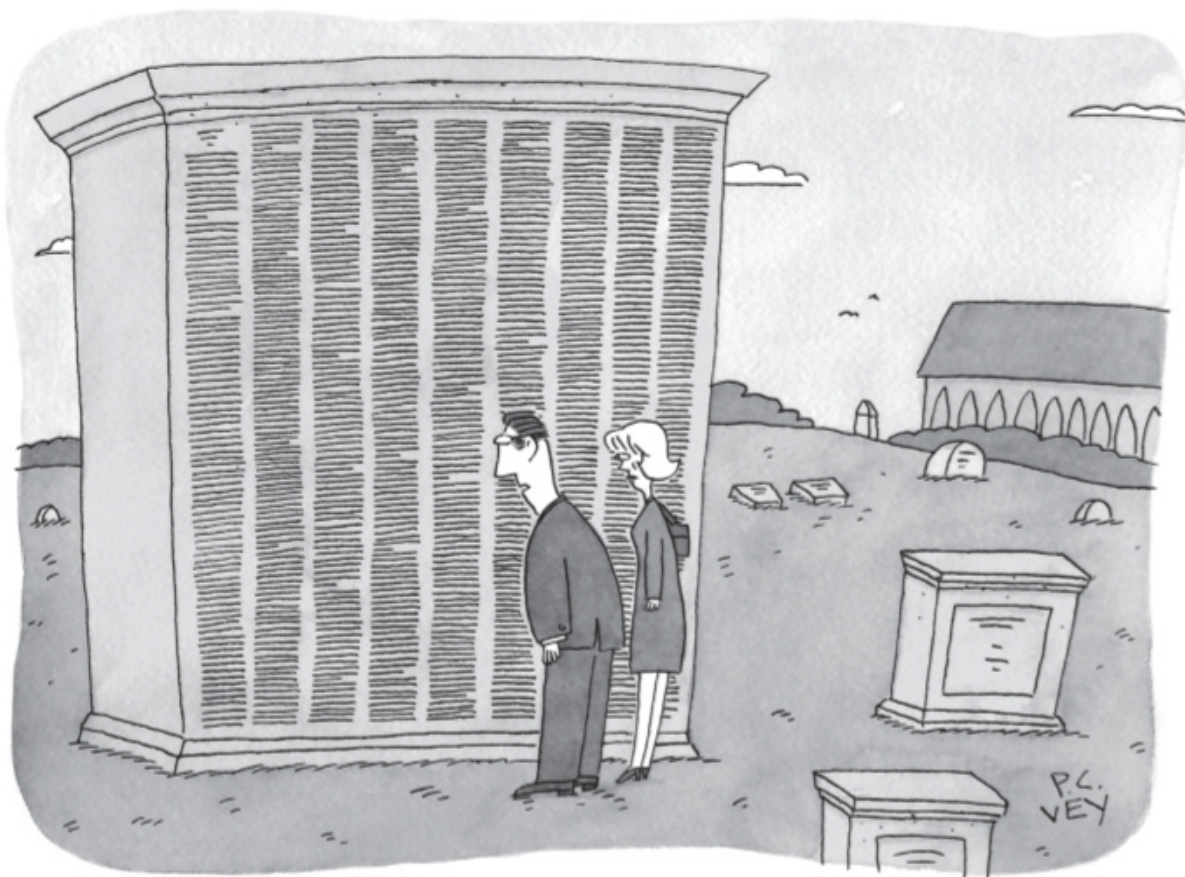
compassion, not empathy, drives altruistic behavior. (Most research on the subject blurs together empathy and compassion, but Bloom argues that this is a failure of experimental design: “The standard measures suck.”) “Empathy can actually get in the way—if you are in terrible pain and I feel so much empathy for you that, being with you, I feel it, too, I may decide to stay home,” he told me. “The Buddhists knew this. There’s all this teaching that says, ‘Don’t get sentimental. Joyously and lovingly help others, but don’t get in their heads.’” Cameron, he told me, was a perfect illustration of his point: “She’s my dream girl. She doesn’t feel the pain of others, so she doesn’t feel empathy per se. But she *cares* for others.”

For nearly a decade, pharmaceutical firms have tried, without success, to create medications that act on FAAH. In 2016, the Portuguese company Bial Pharmaceuticals abandoned one such drug after a Phase 1 clinical trial in which six participants were hospitalized, and one died. (Scientists believe that there may have been a dosing accident, or that the drug had “off target” effects—it ended up binding to a receptor other than FAAH.) Pfizer gave up its own attempts at a FAAH inhibitor in 2012, because the drug didn’t

work. Recently, though, it started research again, and Vernalis funded a study at Brigham and Women’s Hospital, in Boston, which is undergoing peer review. The prospect of a breakthrough is too promising to relinquish.

Opioids, besides being addictive, don’t always work: some kinds of chronic pain don’t respond to drugs that target the opioid system, or to other analgesics, such as ibuprofen and corticosteroids, which operate on the prostaglandin system. Cameron may provide the key to a new class of drugs that operate on the endocannabinoid system. Srivastava told me that the paper he worked on with his colleagues was just the beginning. “You realize that this is sort of nature revealing its secret to you,” he said, “and you only worked on *part* of that secret, but if you worked on the *full* secret, so to say, it could be astounding.”

For half a century, scientists have accumulated evidence that pain is not simply the result of a one-way flow of sensory information from an injury to the brain. Before the brain gets involved, “gates” in the spinal cord modulate the way we feel pain—whether it is fast-travelling information, as in a stab wound, or the dull, slow-moving kind that characterizes chronic pain. These spinal gates can be opened or closed



“It’s a pretty good piece of fiction. I’m surprised he couldn’t get it published in his lifetime.”

by a variety of factors. A distracting physical sensation can temporarily close them; when you bump your head and instinctively rub that spot, you are overriding the nerves that register pain with the nerves that register rubbing. Your emotional state, too, can have an effect. It's evolutionarily advantageous for pain gates to be wide open when you're stressed: if you were anxiously evading a predator, your body would want to let you know if you were stepping on something sharp that might hinder your ability to escape. Conversely, if you are very relaxed, your gates are less apt to be open. One of the things Srivastava and his colleagues want to explore is the extent to which Cameron's pain insensitivity is the result of her peaceful state of mind—and vice versa.

The second phase of Srivastava's research will include Cameron's son, Jeremy, who has the FAAH mutation on one but not both alleles of the gene, and who has a high tolerance for pain. (Unlike many FAAH people, Jeremy, who declined to be interviewed, is painfully shy.) "But this goes much beyond genetics," Srivastava continued. "We are deconstructing pain mechanisms in Jo." Because she has sensation but no pain, she presents unique possibilities for research. "We know this nerve carries that, this is how it is done, bit by bit we have progressed—but here is a golden opportunity to do it all at once, and confirm, rebut, or come up with new findings," Srivastava said. He has been contacted by doctors and scientists in Sweden, France, England, and the United States, who want to collaborate. Srivastava, who is fifty, is an impassive man, but he looked a little fretful as he talked about the research. "I feel slightly overwhelmed," he admitted, "like I don't have enough time in this life to properly do it."

One complicating question is how much of Cameron's Cameranness is really a consequence of her FAAH mutation and FAAH OUT deletion. She has plenty of other genes, after all, and her upbringing and her early environment also played a role in making her who she is. Since the paper was published, Matthew Hill has heard from half a dozen people with pain insensitivity, and he told me that many of them seemed nuts. "If you had this

phenotype and weren't a generally pleasant person like Jo—maybe you're, like, a douche-y frat boy—the way that you would process this might be entirely different. Our whole perception of this phenotype is explicitly based on the fact that it was Jo who presented it."

Srivastava is intent on solving the scientific riddles that Cameron poses. But, in a wistful moment, he suggested that the work also raised profound social questions. "Spending time with her, you realize that if we only had more people like Jo—who are genuinely nice, pleasant, do not give in to anger . . . well," he said, "you know."

Misery may not be all it's cracked up to be. Paul Bloom, who is writing a book about suffering, told me, "There's a big movement in psychology to say, 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.' People talk about 'post-traumatic growth.' I think a lot of it is bullshit. Look at the data: bad things are bad." You aren't healthier after you have cancer or fall down a flight of steps. And it's only in the movies that getting hit by a bolt of lightning turns you into a superhero; in life, it turns you into a fritter.

The entire time I spent behind the wheel in Scotland I was suffering what psychologists call an aversive experience—that is, I was afraid for my life. The Scots drive on the left side of the road, which is already a challenge, but in the Highlands near Loch Ness there is only one lane. When another car comes barreling at you, you're supposed to pull over on the (nonexistent) shoulder, but this can be hard to remember when you come around a sharp curve—which happens roughly every two seconds—and find yourself in the glare of rapidly oncoming headlights. I was pretty sure that one of these encounters would send me over a cliff, plummeting toward the dark water like Toonces the Driving Cat.

I relaxed slightly when I was back in Inverness, where my only foes were the baffling roundabouts, with their unique Scottish etiquette. I had just navigated such a rotary and was on a seemingly easy stretch of highway when I felt an explosion underneath me, then heard the hideous sound of metal scraping asphalt. I'd hit the curb

with such force that I'd popped my front left tire.

I felt my blood pumping and my skin prickling, and I whipped my head around to see how many people I'd killed. In the process, I scratched my forehead on the sharp corner of the seat-belt mechanism, and it *hurt*. There was nowhere to pull over, so I rumbled loudly onward, afraid that something worse was about to happen—mind racing, pain gates open, tire rim scraping the street. I felt panic about getting to the airport, followed by irate self-recrimination (why am I such a bad driver?), then by irate spousal recrimination (why didn't he get his stinking passport renewed in time, so he could come with me on this trip and drive?). I was a wounded, furious, frantic goblin.

Then I thought about Jo Cameron, and what she would do in this situation. She would keep going until there was a place to pull over, and she wouldn't worry about how far that might be or what might happen before then, because there'd be nothing she could do about it. She'd park, call the rental-car place, and take it from there—calmly, kindly, without losing her mind or her sense of humor.

Gradually, my heartbeat slowed, and I saw in the rearview mirror that the scratch on my forehead hadn't even broken the skin. I remembered something that Matthew Hill had said about how a stress response is biologically designed to reallocate energy for survival—the goblin feelings are just a weird side effect. "Cortisol's main job is to boost your blood sugar, and adrenaline's main job is to jack up your blood pressure, so you have fuel and a delivery method to sustain your muscles and brain in dealing with an aversive threat," he'd explained. "But we have so rapidly out-evolved the requirements of those processes they are almost like an evolutionary throwback. When we check a Facebook page and find out our partner has cheated on us, our brain still mounts that same biological response, even though it has zero value to us anymore." Even Hill—who told me how disastrous it would be for human beings to float through life without anxiety—conceded, "Maybe Jo is the next evolutionary step." ♦



PRE-GAME INTERVIEW

BY JAY MARTEL

(On the sidelines.)

REPORTER: So this is it, the big event, something you've worked toward, well, not just for your entire career but for eternity. How do you feel?

SISYPHUS: Really good, Bob.

REPORTER: Now, you're the underdog in this matchup. How are you planning on turning things around?

SISYPHUS: Well, I need to go out there and give a hundred and ten per cent. If I stay within myself, I'll take it to the next level.

REPORTER: Any thoughts on the conditions? It's pretty hot out there.

SISYPHUS: Well, it is the underworld.

REPORTER: Right.

SISYPHUS: I like to think that the heat gives me an advantage: firmer footing.

REPORTER: Well, best of luck.

SISYPHUS: Thanks, Bob! I'm not gonna stop till I reach the top! Yeah!

REPORTER: Now let's go to the booth for our live coverage of this exciting matchup. Ted and Pythagoras?

(Minutes later.)

REPORTER: So that was clearly not the result you were hoping for today.

SISYPHUS: No, Bob, it was not. But you try not to get too low from the losses or too high from the wins.

REPORTER: You have no wins.

SISYPHUS: Exactly, but I'm still feeling good about where I'm at. I feel like if just a couple of things had gone differently I could've come out on top.

REPORTER: What things?

SISYPHUS: Well, like if I had been able to keep that rock on top of the hill.

REPORTER: Right. Any thoughts on your opponent's performance?

SISYPHUS: I just have to give the rock credit for what it did out there. In all of our matchups, it's used a similar strategy, and, I have to admit, it's working.

REPORTER: Gravity?

SISYPHUS: Exactly, Bob. And I feel like maybe the rock just wanted it more? A rock that big, you really have to bring your A game to roll it up the hill and get it to stay there.

REPORTER: Which you haven't been able to do yet. Ever.

SISYPHUS: That's right. But I'm not gonna stop till I reach the top! Yeah!

REPORTER: Let's go back up to the booth. Ted and Pythagoras?

(Minutes later.)

REPORTER: So that was . . . rough. A crushing defeat. Literally.

SISYPHUS: Yes, Bob, it was.

REPORTER: Has it rolled over you like that on the way down before?

SISYPHUS: No, and there's a part of me that's disappointed. But the rest of me is saying, "Go out there and *do* it!"

REPORTER: Seriously?

SISYPHUS: Yes. If I keep playing my game, that rock doesn't stand a chance! It might as well be getting its mail forwarded to the top of that hill, because that's where it's going to stay!

REPORTER: I admire your fighting spirit—as well as the anachronistic analogy—but aren't you even a little bit discouraged?

SISYPHUS: I am not, because there's no "I" in "fail," Bob.

REPORTER: Actually, there is.

SISYPHUS: There's no "sissy" in "Sisyphus."

REPORTER: So you don't do anagrams.

SISYPHUS: There's nothing I can't do!

REPORTER: Back to the booth.

(Minutes later.)

REPORTER: So, from the replay, it looks like the rock rolled over you, then was delayed by some brush while you slid down the hill, and then it crushed you again. And again and again. Is that right?

SISYPHUS: Yes, Bob. And I won't lie—this one hurts. But it's all mental, and if . . .

REPORTER: Hold on. We just watched your body being repeatedly pulverized by a huge boulder.

SISYPHUS: You gotta give credit to my opponent. It had a solid game plan today and executed it well.

REPORTER: Rolling over you repeatedly?

SISYPHUS: Exactly, Bob. I just need to get back to my basics, and, boom—I'll be taking it to the next level.

REPORTER: Do you ever wonder what you did to be stuck at this level? Because I do.

SISYPHUS: It's just character-building adversity that, in the end, is gonna make me stronger.

REPORTER: I keep thinking over my life, wondering what I did to anger the gods.

SISYPHUS: The gods are on my side, and I'd like to take this opportunity to thank them for my success, because I'm just one man out here.

REPORTER: You have had absolutely no success. All right, it's time for you to get crushed by the big rock again.

SISYPHUS: Not this time! I'm gonna make you a believer, Bob!

REPORTER: Please, someone make this stop.

(Minutes later.)

REPORTER 2: How do you feel?

SISYPHUS: Really good, Bob.

REPORTER 2: Uh, it's Bill. Bob ran onto the course during that last round and into the oncoming rock.

SISYPHUS: Geez, that's rough. It's a tough game, but you hate to see that happen to anyone. Bob, we're rooting for a speedy recovery, buddy!

REPORTER 2: Bob's dead.

SISYPHUS: Well, my sympathies. I'm not gonna stop till I reach the top!

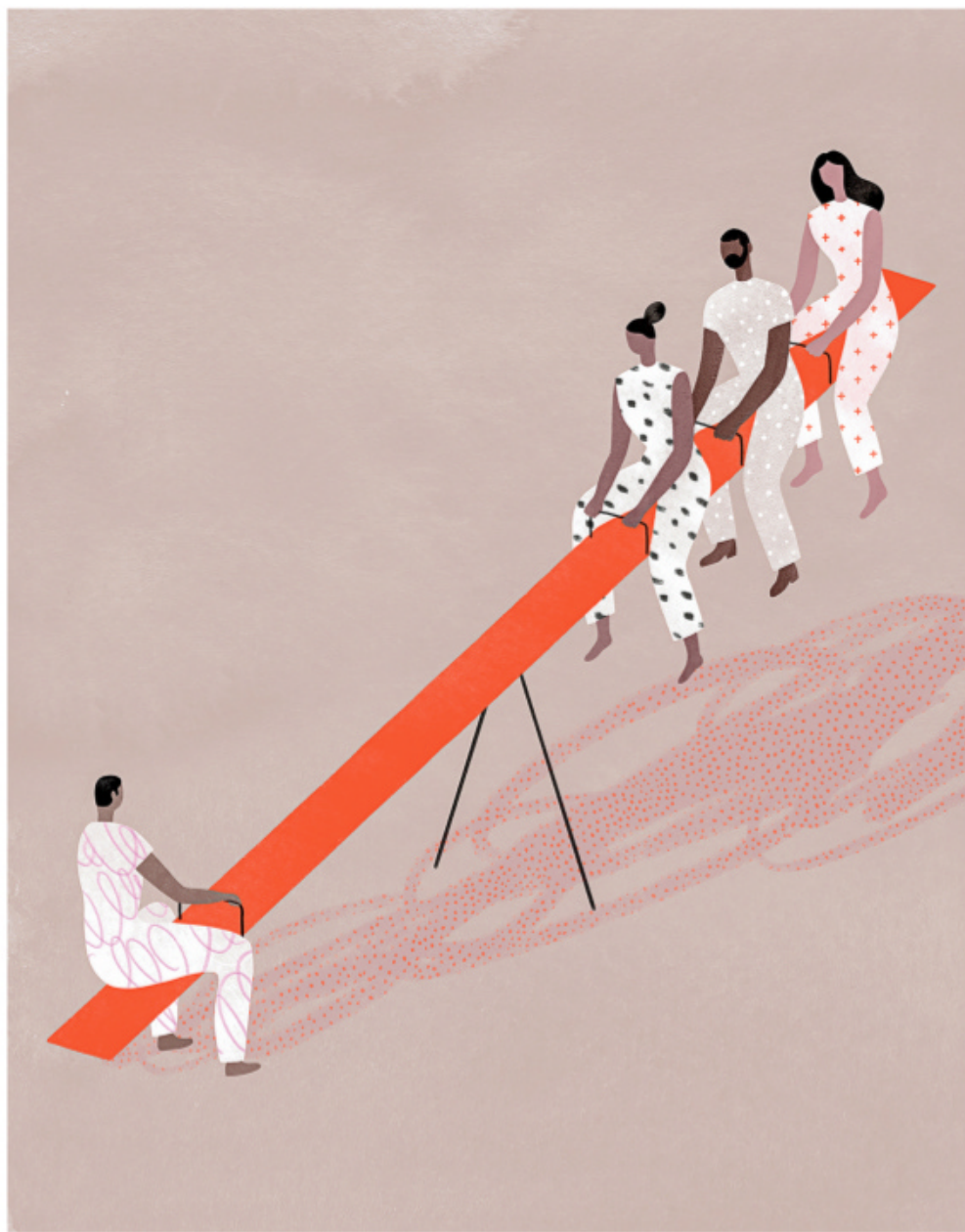
(They watch the grounds crew working at the bottom of the hill.)

SISYPHUS: As soon as they clean up that mess. ♦

SAME DIFFERENCE

What the idea of equality can do for us, and what it can't.

BY JOSHUA ROTHMAN



Michael and Angela have just turned fifty-five. They know two people who have died in the past few years—one from cancer, another in a car accident. It occurs to them that they should make a plan for their kids. They have some money in the bank. Suppose they were both killed in a plane crash—what would happen to it?

They have four children, who range in age from their late teens to their late twenties. Chloe, the oldest, is a math wiz with a coding job at Google; she hopes to start her own company soon. Will, who has a degree in social work, is paying off his student debt while working at a halfway house for recov-

ering addicts. The twins, James and Alexis, are both in college. James, a perpetually stoned underachiever, is convinced that he can make it as a YouTuber. (He's already been suspended twice, for on-campus pranks.) Alexis, who hopes to become a poet, has a congenital condition that could leave her blind by middle age.

At first, Michael and Angela plan to divide their money equally. Then they start to think about it. Chloe is on the fast track to remunerative Silicon Valley success; Will is burdened by debt in his quest to help the vulnerable. If James were to come into an inheritance, he'd likely grow even lazier,

spending it on streetwear and edibles; Alexis, with her medical situation, might need help later in life. Maybe, Michael and Angela think, it doesn't make sense to divide the money into equal portions after all. Something more sophisticated might be required. What matters to them is that their children flourish equally, and this might mean giving the kids unequal amounts—an unappealing prospect.

The philosopher Ronald Dworkin considered this type of parental conundrum in an essay called "What Is Equality?," from 1981. The parents in such a family, he wrote, confront a trade-off between two worthy egalitarian goals. One goal, "equality of resources," might be achieved by dividing the inheritance evenly, but it has the downside of failing to recognize important differences among the parties involved. Another goal, "equality of welfare," tries to take account of those differences by means of twisty calculations. Take the first path, and you willfully ignore meaningful facts about your children. Take the second, and you risk dividing the inheritance both unevenly and incorrectly.

In 2014, the Pew Research Center asked Americans to rank the "greatest dangers in the world." A plurality put inequality first, ahead of "religious and ethnic hatred," nuclear weapons, and environmental degradation. And yet people don't agree about what, exactly, "equality" means. In the past year, for example, New York City residents have found themselves in a debate over the city's elite public high schools, such as Stuyvesant and Bronx Science. Some ethnicities are vastly overrepresented at the schools, while others are dramatically underrepresented. What to do? One side argues that the city should guarantee procedural equality: it should insure that all students and families are equally informed about and encouraged to study for the entrance exam. The other side argues for a more direct, representation-based form of equality: it would jettison the exam, adopting a new admissions system designed to produce student bodies reflective of the city's demography. Both groups pursue worthy egalitarian goals, but each approach runs against the other. Because people and their circumstances differ, there is, Dworkin writes, a trade-off between

We can share an objection to inequality without sharing a conception of equality.

treating people equally and treating them “as equals.”

The complexities of egalitarianism are especially frustrating because inequalities are so easy to grasp. C.E.O.s, on average, make almost three hundred times what their employees make; billionaire donors shape our politics; automation favors owners over workers; urban economies grow while rural areas stagnate; the best health care goes to the richest. Across the political spectrum, we grieve the loss of what Alexis de Tocqueville called the “general equality of conditions,” which, with the grievous exception of slavery, once shaped American society. It’s not just about money. Tocqueville, writing in 1835, noted that our “ordinary practices of life” were egalitarian, too: we behaved as if there weren’t many differences among us. Today, there are “premiere” lines for popcorn at the movies and five tiers of Uber; we still struggle to address obvious inequalities of all kinds based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and other aspects of identity. Inequality is everywhere, and unignorable. We’ve diagnosed the disease. Why can’t we agree on a cure?

In January of 2015, Jeremy Waldron, a political philosopher at New York University’s School of Law, delivered a series of lectures at the University of Edinburgh on the fundamental nature of human equality. He began by provoking his audience. “Look around you,” he said, “and look at the differences between you.” The crowd included the old and the young, men and women, the beautiful and the ugly, the rich and the poor, the healthy and the infirm, the high-status and the low. In theory, Waldron said, the audience could contain “soldiers as well as civilians, fugitives and convicts as well as law-abiding citizens, homeless people as well as property owners”—even “bankrupts, infants, lunatics,” all with different legal rights.

In a book based on those lectures, “One Another’s Equals: The Basis of Human Equality,” Waldron points out that people are also marked by differences of skill, experience, creativity, and virtue. Given such consequential differences, he asks, in what sense are people “equal”? Waldron believes in our fundamental equality; as a philosopher,

however, he wants to know why he believes in it.

According to the Declaration of Independence, it is “self-evident” that all men are created equal. But, from a certain perspective, it’s our inequality that’s self-evident. A decade ago, the writer Deborah Solomon asked Donald Trump what he thought of the idea that “all men are created equal.” “It’s not true,” Trump reportedly said. “Some people are born very smart. Some people are born not so smart. Some people are born very beautiful, and some people are not, so you can’t say they’re all created equal.” Trump acknowledged that everyone is entitled to equal treatment under the law but concluded that “All men are created equal” is “a very confusing phrase to a lot of people.” More than twenty per cent of Americans, according to a 2015 poll, agree: they believe that the statement “All men are created equal” is false.

In Waldron’s view, though, it’s not a binary choice; it’s possible to see people as equal and unequal simultaneously. A society can sort its members into various categories—lawful and criminal, brilliant and not—while also allowing some principle of basic equality to circumscribe its judgments and, in some contexts, override them. Egalitarians like Dworkin and Waldron call this principle “deep equality.” It’s because of deep equality that even those people who acquire additional, justified worth through their actions—heroes, senators, pop stars—can still be considered fundamentally no better than anyone else. By the same token, Waldron says, deep equality insures that even the most heinous murderer can be seen as a member of the human race, “with all the worth and status that this implies.” Deep equality—among other principles—ought to tell us that it’s wrong to sequester the small children of migrants in squalid prisons, whatever their legal status. Waldron wants to find its source.

In the course of his search, he explores centuries of intellectual history. Many thinkers, from Cicero to Locke, have argued that our ability to reason is what makes us equals. (But isn’t this ability itself unequally distributed?) Other thinkers, including Immanuel Kant, have cited our moral sense. (But doesn’t this restrict equality to the vir-

tuous?) Some philosophers, such as Jeremy Bentham, have suggested that it’s our capacity to suffer that equalizes us. (But then, many animals suffer, too.) Others have nominated our capacity to love. (But what about selfish, hard-hearted people?) It would be helpful, on a practical level, if there were a well-defined basis for our deep equality. Such a basis might guide our thinking. If deep equality turned out to be based on our ability to suffer, for example, then Michael and Angela might feel better about giving their daughter Alexis, who risks blindness, more money than her siblings. But Waldron finds none of these arguments totally persuasive.

In various religious traditions, he observes, equality flows not just from broad assurances that we are all made in God’s image but from some sense that everyone is the protagonist in a saga of error, realization, and redemption: we’re equal because God cares about how things turn out for each of us. He notes that atheists, too, might locate our equality in the idea that we each have our own story. Waldron himself is taken by Hannah Arendt’s related concept of “natality,” the notion that what each of us share is having been born as a “new-comer,” entering into history with “the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.” And yet Arendt herself was pessimistic about the quest for a proof of equality; in her view, the Holocaust had revealed that there was “nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human.” If that’s true, then equality may be not a self-evident fact about human beings but a human-made social construction that we must choose to put into practice.

In the end, Waldron concludes that there is no “small polished unitary soul-like substance” that makes us equal; there’s only a patchwork of arguments for our deep equality, collectively compelling but individually limited. Equality is a composite idea—a nexus of complementary and competing intuitions.

The blurry nature of equality makes it hard to solve egalitarian dilemmas from first principles. In each situation, we must feel our way forward, reconciling our conflicting intuitions about what “equal” means. Deep equality is still an important idea—it tells us,

among other things, that discrimination and bigotry are wrong. But it isn't, in itself, fine-grained enough to answer thorny questions about how a community should divide up what it has. To answer those questions, it must be augmented by other, narrower tenets.

The communities that have the easiest time doing that tend to have some clearly defined, shared purpose. Sprinters competing in a hundred-metre dash have varied endowments and train in different conditions; from a certain perspective, those differences make every race unfair. (How can you compete with someone who has better genes?) But runners form an egalitarian community with a common goal—finding out who's fastest—and so they have invented rules and procedures (qualifying heats, drug bans) that allow them to consider a race valid as long as no one jumps the gun. By embracing an agreed-upon theory of equality before the race, the sprinters can find collective meaning in the ranked inequalities that emerge when it ends. A hospital, similarly, might find an egalitarian way to do the necessary work of giving some patients priority over others, perhaps by adopting a theory of equality that ignores certain kinds of differences (some patients are rich, others poor) while acknowledging others (some patients are in urgent trouble, others less so). What matters, above all, is that the scheme makes sense to those involved.

Because maintaining such agreements takes constant work, egalitarian communities are always in danger of disintegrating. Nevertheless, the egalitarian landscape is dotted with islands of agreement: communes, co-ops, and well-organized competitions in which a shared theory of equality is used for some practical purpose. An individual family might divide up its chores by agreeing on a theory of equality that balances quick, unpleasant tasks, such as bathroom-cleaning, with slower, more enjoyable ones, such as dog-walking. This sort of artisanal egalitarianism is comparatively easy to arrange. Mass-producing it is what's hard. A whole society can't get together in a room to hash things out. Instead, consensus must coalesce slowly around broad egalitarian principles.

No principle is perfect; each contains hidden dangers that emerge with time.

Many people, in contemplating the division of goods, invoke the principle of necessity: the idea that our first priority should be the equal fulfillment of fundamental needs. The hidden danger here becomes apparent once we go past a certain point of subsistence. When Fyodor Dostoyevsky went to military school, he wrote home to ask his land-owning but cash-strapped father, Mikhail Andreevich, for new boots and other furnishings, arguing that, with-



out them, he would be ostracized. Mikhail Andreevich recognized his son's changed needs and granted his request; he died soon afterward, under mysterious circumstances, and Dostoyevsky came to believe that he had been murdered by the serfs he had overworked. The episode, which helped inspire "The Brothers Karamazov," also illustrates a core problem that bedevils egalitarianism—what philosophers call "the problem of expensive tastes."

The problem—what feels like a necessity to one person seems like a luxury to another—is familiar to anyone who's argued with a foodie spouse or roommate about the grocery bill. It applies not just to material goods but to societal ones. To an environmentalist, protecting the spotted owl is a necessity; to a logger who stands to lose his job, it's a luxury. The problem is so insistent that a whole body of political philosophy—"prioritarianism"—is devoted to the challenge of sorting people with needs from people with wants. It's difficult in part because the line shifts as the years pass. Medical procedures that seem optional today become necessities tomorrow; educational attainments that were once unusual, such as college degrees, become increasingly indispensable with time. In a study for the National Bureau of Economic Research, four economists evaluated the success of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. They found that, judg-

ing by a modernized version of the definition of "poverty" which Johnson used, the poverty rate in America fell from 19.5 per cent in 1963 to 2.3 per cent in 2017. Still, they note in their paper, "expectations for minimum living standards evolve." Today, taking advantage of the social safety net that the War on Poverty put in place—food stamps, Medicaid, and so on—is itself a sign of poverty. A new, more robust safety net—free college, Medicare for All—becomes, for some, an egalitarian necessity.

Some thinkers try to tame the problem of expensive tastes by asking what a "normal" or "typical" person might find necessary. But it's easy to define "typical" too narrowly, letting unfair assumptions influence our judgments. In an influential 1999 article called "What Is the Point of Equality?," the philosopher Elizabeth Anderson pointed out an odd feature of our social contract: if you're fired from your job, unemployment benefits help keep you afloat, while if you stop working to have a child you must deal with the loss of income yourself. This contradiction, she writes, reveals an assumption that "the desire to procreate is just another expensive taste"; it reflects, she argues, the sexist presumption that "atomistic egoism and self-sufficiency" are the human norm. The word "necessity" suggests the idea of a bare minimum. In fact, it sets a high bar. Clearing it may require rethinking how society functions.

Perhaps because necessity is so demanding, our egalitarian commitments tend to rest on a different principle: luck. The philosopher Richard Arneson explained the idea a couple of decades ago: "Some people are blessed with good luck, some are cursed with bad luck, and it is the responsibility of society—all of us regarded collectively—to alter the distribution of goods and evils that arises from the jumble of lotteries that constitutes human life as we know it." Anderson, in an influential coinage, calls this outlook "luck egalitarianism."

Instead of dividing things up by asking what people need, a luck-egalitarian system tries to equalize the distribution of misfortune. If you're born on the wrong side of the tracks, or if your house is destroyed in an unpre-

dictable natural disaster, luck egalitarianism suggests that you deserve help. If you screw up—by squandering your savings, launching a failed business, and so on—you're on your own. It's to luck egalitarianism that we owe the metaphors of the "level playing field" and the "social safety net." The first equalizes the bad luck we're born with; the second, the bad luck that finds us as adults.

As Americans, we are charged with recognizing two conflicting values: individualism and egalitarianism. By smoothing out the unlucky differences while accepting those for which people are responsible, luck egalitarianism promises to help us be individualists and egalitarians simultaneously. But, as Anderson and others have argued, doing this is harder than it sounds. One problem, Anderson writes, is that luck egalitarianism condescends to those it helps: by seeing them as hapless victims of circumstance, it denies them the “equal respect” they’re due as citizens of a democracy. (It’s perhaps for this reason that the people who might benefit from the extension of government programs so often vote against them.)

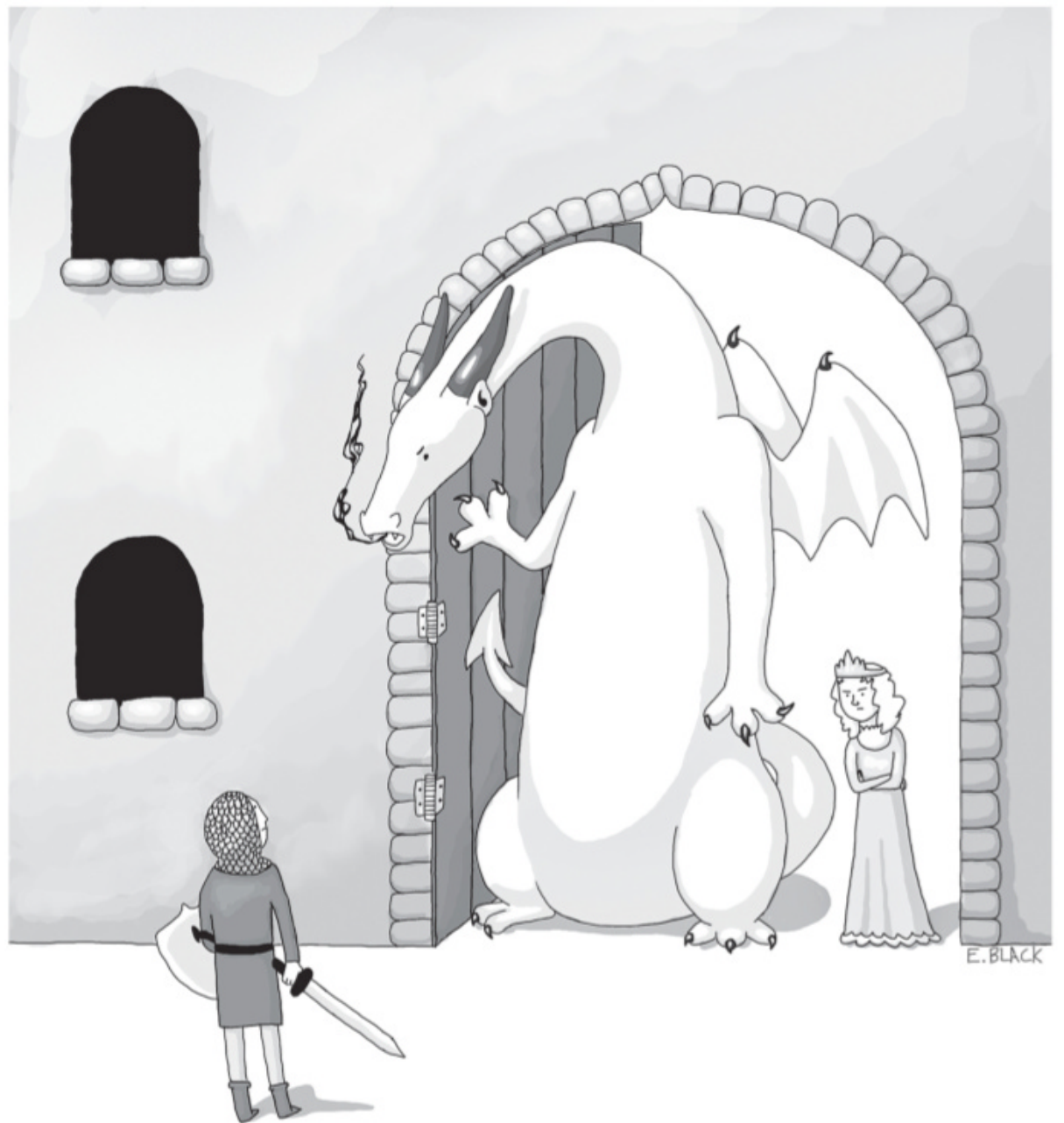
Another problem, which the political theorist Yascha Mounk explores in “The Age of Responsibility: Luck, Choice, and the Welfare State,” is that the distinction between choice and luck is hard to sustain. If you sleep in instead of coming to work every day and then get fired, you’re clearly making bad choices. But what if you’re born into a family with an income just north of the poverty line, then drop out of high school to get a dead-end job? In all likelihood, you’ve suffered from bad luck and made bad choices. Suppose you turn down a place at your state university to take a job at the auto plant where your parents work, and the plant then closes. The closing of the plant was out of your control, but the decision to work there rather than go to college was yours to make. If you’d acquired more skills, would you be more employable? Or would the forces of globalization that led to the closure of the plant have narrowed your job prospects no matter your training? You might lie awake night after night mulling such questions without settling on answers; it’s absurd, Mounk writes, to expect “a real-world state bureaucracy to answer such intricate hypothetical

questions about millions of citizens.”

The distinction between choice and luck, he argues, is a matter not of fact but of perspective. Explanations of human behavior have traditionally been divided into two groups: those which focus on the forces that push us around and those which emphasize how, as individuals, we can choose to resist them. The same phenomenon can be viewed from either side of the so-called structure-agency distinction. For most of the twentieth century, Mounk writes, criminologists looked at crime from a structural perspective: they urged politicians to fight it by reducing poverty—its root cause. Later, however, they changed tack: they began examining the motivations of individual criminals and asking how potential wrongdoers, as “agents,” might be dissuaded from committing crimes. The criminologists weren’t repudiating their prior insights about poverty, Mounk says; they were just looking at crime from a different perspective. The agent-based perspective was more use-

ful to police officers, who couldn't lift a neighborhood out of poverty but could change the way they patrolled it.

Mounk thinks that most people understand, intuitively, that the distinction between structure and agency is—like the distinction between “nature” and “nurture”—an artifact of explanation, not a part of reality. All explanations are limited, we know, and tell only part of the story. This, he writes, is why we are so ambivalent about luck egalitarianism and the politicians who see the world through its lens. Conservatives, hoping to constrain the size of the welfare state, overstate how much control people have over their lives; liberals, hoping to expand it, overstate our powerlessness. But both positions are unconvincing. “While voters are receptive to the idea that it is deeply unjust for some public schools to have better funding than others, they balk when they are told that students who do well in school are merely lucky,” Mounk writes. “And while they recognize that



"She doesn't want to see you, man."

the explanation for the stagnating living standards of average people lies in larger structural transformations of the world economy, they are skeptical when they are told that the choices of specific individuals don't play any role in determining their particular economic fate."

There's a problem with finding problems with egalitarianism. The head fights the gut; complexities can't drown out the moral law within. Reading Waldron, Anderson, Mounk, and other thinkers on egalitarianism, I found myself remembering a time that started when I was eleven or twelve years old. My parents were divorced and rarely spoke; I went to three middle schools in three years, one bad, one middling, one good. The bad school was near my mother's house, where we lived in the basement, having rented out the main floor. The good school was in a wealthy suburb. I attended it by claiming to live at the address of a family friend who had a small apartment, above a commercial space, on its edge. (So-called enrollment fraud is common across the country, especially in places where rich and poor school districts border each other.)

For a while, I took the bus home to the apartment, hanging out there until late in the evening. When this arrange-

ment grew untenable, my mother devised a plan. She'd struck up a conversation with a cabdriver and taken his card; she called him and asked if, for a flat monthly fee, he'd pick me up at school each day and drop me at my father's house, a short drive away. There weren't many fares at two-thirty in the afternoon in the Maryland suburbs, and he said yes.

Peter, the cabdriver, began picking me up from a hidden spot past the soccer fields, under some trees. He was from West Africa, with an accent I sometimes struggled with. We talked about his home town, his girlfriend, the books I was reading—Stephen King, for the most part—in which he sweetly expressed an interest. Eventually, two of my friends, who were also picked up after school, discovered my secret spot and joined me there. As Peter and I drove away, everyone waved.

One day, Peter was agitated when he arrived. "I have to make a detour, O.K.?" he said. "Don't tell your mom." He didn't wave to my friends, and we took a left instead of a right, eventually entering a neighborhood of small, unkempt row houses. As we drove, Peter told me how the taxi business worked. He didn't own his cab; he rented it from the cab company, in a rent-to-own arrangement. If he missed his monthly payment, the

company took the cab back. The payment was extremely high. "I drive and I drive and I drive," he said. "But I can't make it. I can't make it!" As we pulled up in front of his cousin's house, he sobbed. I watched from the back seat as he returned to the cab, weeping, with borrowed cash in his hand.

I wasn't a sheltered kid; I knew about economic hardship. A few times that year, my mother had fallen behind on our bills, and our power had been cut off; we'd showered and eaten dinner in the dark. She'd hidden her despair, but Peter had shared his. For him, the bottom could fall out faster and more completely. More than a decade later, in a Dickensian coincidence, Peter, who was still driving cabs, picked my father up from the airport and gave him a business card. Peter started driving him, too; that year, on a trip with my dad and his family, Peter and I were reunited, to our great delight. But not long afterward he died. He suffered from diabetes and hypertension, and had no health insurance; he went too long before seeking treatment for an infection in his toe. It got into his bloodstream, and he died of septic shock.

Injustice isn't cerebral. Peter and I were two equal people on the same earth. What's so complicated about that?

The gap between intuition and argument—between outrage and the best response to that outrage—is the subject of Robert Tsai's "Practical Equality: Forging Justice in a Divided Nation." Tsai, a law professor at American University, places great weight on the intuition that we are "one another's equals"—and yet, he writes, it's inevitable that, "in a diverse democracy, people will disagree about what equality means." Hashing out questions of equality, he concludes, can be so fraught, so confusing, that the wisest course is sometimes to circumvent them. Inequality can be resisted, and equality pursued, by other, less tangled means.

Tsai, a constitutional litigator, is intimately familiar with how arguments about equality have unfolded in the courts. Often, he writes, the moral magnetism of equality backfires. To crusade for it is to be on the side of justice, and so there is no choice but to accuse those obstructing it of being racists, misogy-



"Some are born to meet, some achieve meetings, and some have meetings thrust upon them."

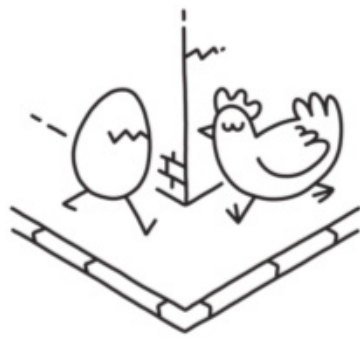
nists, élitists, or oppressors. Tsai tells the story of *City of Cleburne, Texas v. Cleburne Living Center, Inc.*, a Supreme Court case from 1985. A private company proposed opening a group home for thirteen intellectually disabled residents in the small city of Cleburne; it was thwarted by a local ordinance that required a permit for the opening of facilities for the “feeble-minded.” City officials opposed to the home cited a variety of concerns: the preservation of the neighborhood’s “serenity,” the danger to nearby elderly people, the possibility that bullies from a nearby junior high school would torment their new neighbors. Advocates for it pointed out that the ordinance’s origins lay in the country’s eugenicist past. (In 1927, a Supreme Court decision permitted the sterilization of the intellectually disabled “for the protection and health of the state.”)

When the case reached the Supreme Court, the arguments against the ordinance were mostly framed in terms of equality. Some people likened it to an apartheid law: it was no different, they argued, from a rule barring the construction of hospitals for people of a particular religion or ethnicity. The Reagan Administration, defending the law, argued that, since the disabled did have “distinctive needs and abilities,” treating them differently need not reflect “invidious and derogatory aims.” The table was set for an intractable egalitarian debate. A morally charged yet abstract question had been raised about the place of intellectual disabilities within a society committed to equality; the answer would concretely affect millions of disabled people. And that discussion, in turn, had been connected to the accusation that those who objected to the home were closed-minded bigots—a charge sure to rally many of their fellow-citizens to their defense. The likelihood of the Court coming to a universally convincing conclusion seemed remote.

In the end, Tsai writes, the Justices decided to avoid thinking in terms of equality. Instead, they applied the “rule of reason,” asking whether the citizens’ concerns had any rational basis, and concluding that they did not. By taking this approach, the Court avoided entirely the question of whether the citizens who objected to the home were

motivated by bigotry; it also skirted the Waldronesque question of what it might mean to treat intellectually disabled people equally. And yet, Tsai writes, the Court still created a basically egalitarian outcome, and “placed discriminatory action based on damaging cultural stereotypes off-limits.”

The Court used the same approach in other equality-enhancing decisions. In *United States v. Virginia*, from 1996,



a female high-school student filed a complaint against the Virginia Military Institute (the so-called West Point of the South), which excluded women. The arguments on her behalf, which leaned heavily on equality, soon got bogged down in the question of what it might mean for the Institute to treat male and female cadets equally. Instead of weighing in on that issue, the Court ruled that there was no rational basis for denying women admission.

These cases and many others, Tsai believes, show that it’s often more practical to pursue “equality by other means” than to sail into the crosscurrents of egalitarian debate. Reasonableness, or rationality, is one test to which we can subject inegalitarian systems or rules. One can also ask whether they are fair, whether their specific consequences are cruel, whether all relevant voices have been heard. Answering these questions isn’t always easy, but it’s easier than generating consensus about what “equal” means. We make more progress, Tsai argues, when we “shift the focus of moral outrage.”

Language itself may be misleading. Us. Appalled by inequality, our minds turn immediately to its opposite. Side-stepping that impulse, as Tsai advocates, requires giving up a satisfying rhetorical clarity, but it may bring us closer to our moral common sense. The philosopher David Schmidtz explains why in a 2006 book titled “Elements of Justice.”

Schmidtz begins by asking us to contemplate what makes a neighborhood a good place to live: a thriving community might have a grocery store, a fire station, a library, a playground. Similarly, a system of justice must have a few different structures to be livable. It’s easy to imagine justice as a unitary thing—a single, imposing building, a Supreme Court. But it’s more like a collection of buildings, each with its own function.

In the neighborhood of justice, Schmidtz identifies four structures: equality, desert, reciprocity, and need. We consult these in different contexts, to solve different kinds of problems. Citizens are owed equality before the law. Workers, by contrast, should be compensated differently, depending on what they have accomplished. In relationships with our partners, we favor reciprocity. In trying to do right by our children, we ask what they need. (Michael and Angela, in considering their will, might focus on necessity more than the other concepts: instead of asking “What do they deserve?” or “What have they done for us lately?,” they might ask, “What do our kids need?”) None of these principles are capacious enough to serve in every situation; in fact, they are often in tension with one another. And they can be used inappropriately. No one wants a merit-based marriage. A workplace that operates by reciprocity is a dysfunctional one.

In real life, therefore, we amble around the neighborhood of justice. A coach doesn’t run her team on egalitarian principles alone; to win, she must field the best players more often. But she doesn’t run a ruthless meritocracy, either. On a good team, players get the help they need, they assist one another reciprocally, they’re rewarded for their individual accomplishments, and they are treated similarly enough that they feel connected in a common enterprise.

The frustrations and complexities of egalitarianism reflect the hidden complexity of equality. It looks simple and self-evident, as though one could proclaim it into existence. But achieving it requires a willingness to recognize, and to shift among, many different conceptions of what’s right—a kind of moral egalitarianism. Even equality itself, as an ideal, is insufficient. No one version of the good can rule the rest. ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

FIGHT FIGHT, TALK TALK

The future of America's contest with China.

BY EVAN OSNOS

Last fall, to celebrate the seventieth birthday of the People's Republic of China, the government planned the largest military parade and "mass pageant" in Beijing's history. On October 1st, more than a hundred thousand performers and soldiers mustered downtown, forming waves of color that stretched from voguish skyscrapers in the east to the squat pavilions of the Forbidden City.

At ten o'clock, artillery blasted a fifty-six-gun salute, as President Xi Jinping watched from a high balcony overlooking Tiananmen Square, known to the outside world as the site of a student-led uprising that was crushed in 1989. (In China's official history, the movement and the crackdown have been reduced to a footnote.) Xi is sixty-six years old, with a full, reddish face, neatly combed hair, and an expression of patient immovability. Since taking office, in 2012, he has redoubled political repression and suspended term limits on the Presidency, so he will run the country for as long as he chooses. For this occasion, instead of his usual Western attire, he wore a black Mao suit. "On this spot, seventy years ago, Comrade Mao Zedong solemnly declared to the world the establishment of the People's Republic of China," he said. "That great event thoroughly transformed China's tragic fate, ending more than a century of poverty, weakness, and bullying."

Whenever Chinese leaders stage a public spectacle, it provides a chance to assess their self-portrait. In 2008, when Beijing hosted the Olympics, the opening ceremony celebrated Confucius and ignored Mao; the organizers wanted to project confidence but not brashness, a posture that China described as "Hide your strength and bide your time." Eleven years later, China no longer hides the swagger. On the balcony, to Xi's right, was the politburo's reigning propagandist, Wang Huning, a former professor

who once travelled the United States and honed a prickly theory about dealing with its people. "The Americans pay attention to strength," he wrote, after attending a football game at the Naval Academy. "Football has some strategy, but it's not elegant; mainly, it relies on strength." He added, "The Americans apply that spirit to many fields, including the military, politics, and the economy."

In the stands around Xi, uniformed volunteers demonstrated the optimal technique for waving a miniature flag—short, vigorous strokes—and stressed the value of a friendly "countenance" for the camera. But nobody needed much coaching; for many in the crowd, this was a day of unaffected pride in China's new wealth and power. When I started studying Mandarin, twenty-five years ago, China's economy was smaller than Italy's. It is now twenty-four times the size it was then, ranking second only to America's, and the share of Chinese people in extreme poverty has shrunk to less than one per cent. Growth has slowed sharply, but the country still has legions of citizens vying to enter the middle class. It is estimated that a billion Chinese people have yet to board an airplane.

Xi's speech gave no acknowledgment of the headlines—China's heavily criticized internment of Muslims in Xinjiang, protests in Hong Kong, a grinding trade war with the United States. In his telling, the momentum of history was beyond question. "No force can shake the status of our great motherland," Xi said. "No force can stop the advance of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation."

To a degree still difficult for outsiders to absorb, China is preparing to shape the twenty-first century, much as the U.S. shaped the twentieth. Its government is deciding which features of the global status quo to preserve and which to reject, not only in business,



With tensions rising over trade, espionage, and



security, leaders in Washington and Beijing are wrestling to determine who will dominate the twenty-first century.

culture, and politics but also in such basic values as human rights, free speech, and privacy. In the lead-up to the anniversary, the government demonstrated its capacity for social surveillance. At the Beijing University of Technology, where students trained to march in the parade, the administration extracted data from I.D. cards to see who ate what in the dining hall, and then delivered targeted guidance for a healthy diet. In the final weeks, authorities narrowed the Internet connection to the outside world, secreted dissidents out of town, and banned the flying of drones, kites, and pet pigeons.

From the balcony, Xi presided over fifteen thousand goose-stepping troops and phalanxes of tanks and jets—five hundred and eighty pieces of equipment in all. For nearly a century, the U.S. has been the dominant military power in the Pacific, as it has in much of the world. Xi sees this as an unacceptable intrusion. “It is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia,” he has said. To achieve that, China has strengthened its mili-

tary to the point that Pentagon analysts believe it could defeat U.S. forces in a confrontation along its borders.

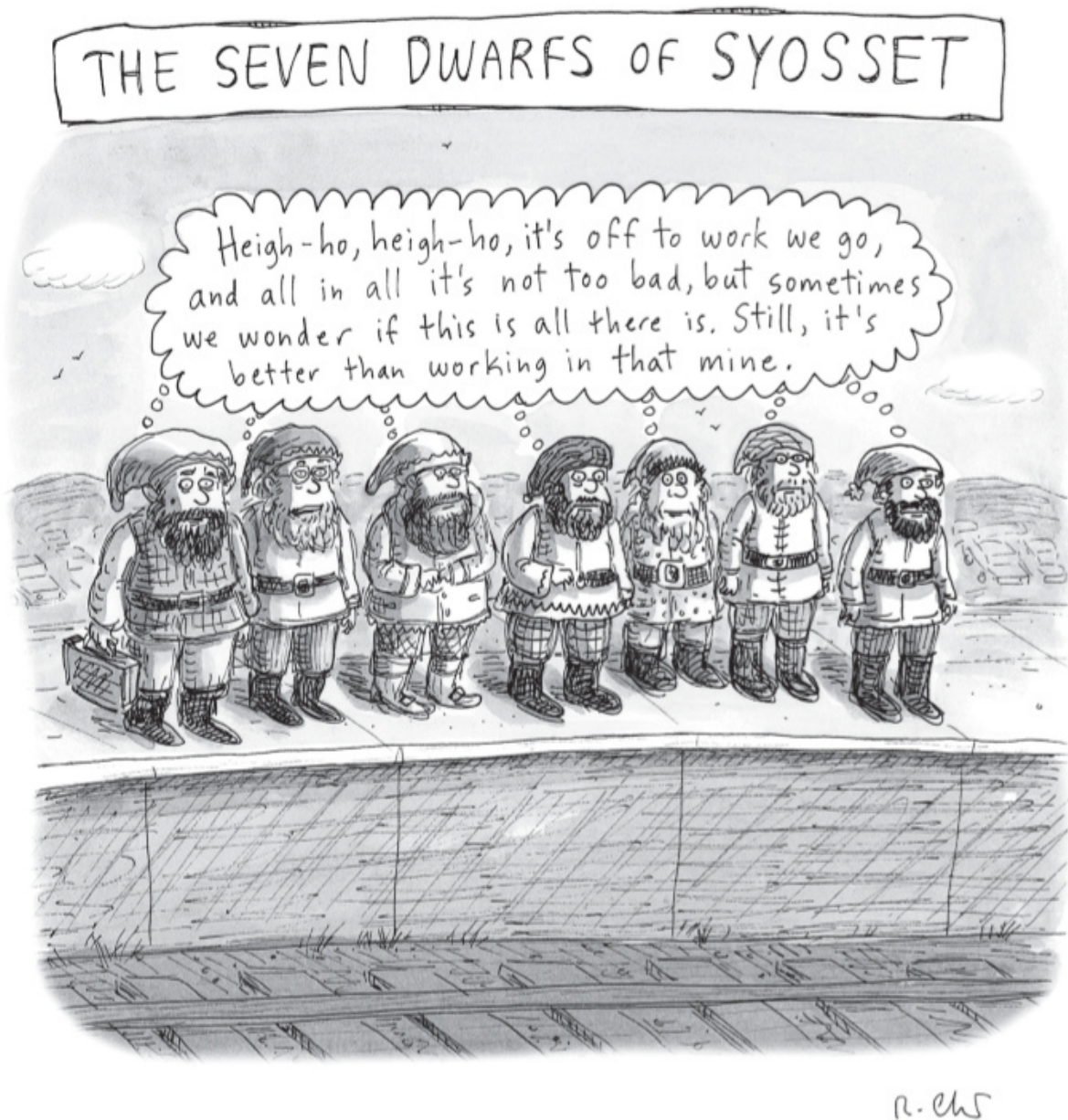
The most anticipated moment of the day was the début of a state-of-the-art missile called the Dongfeng-41, which can travel at twenty-five times the speed of sound toward targets more than nine thousand miles away, farther than anything comparable in the American arsenal. Watching the missile roll by, Hu Xijin, the editor-in-chief of the *Global Times*, a nationalistic state newspaper, tweeted, “No need to fear it. Just respect it and respect China.” Hu, a seasoned provocateur, added a sly jab at the travails of democracy: above a picture of the missile, he wrote that China was just fine forgoing the “good stuff” of electoral democracy on display in “Haiti, Libya, Iraq and Ukraine.”

When I visited Hu that week, at his office across town, he was in a buoyant mood. The pageant was less about military hardware, he said, than about “self-confidence.” He offered a pitying contrast with the United States. “You overestimated your abilities to transform the world,” he said. “You can’t simply

write the screenplay for the future. China, India, the rest of the world—everyone will have a hand in the script.” He pointed to America’s pressure on China over trade. “They thought China was going to throw up the white flag,” Hu said. “But China kept up the fight. It appears that the ability to inflict pain on China is not what you thought it would be.”

I lived in Beijing for eight years, starting in 2005. For the past six years, I have lived in Washington, D.C. This fall, I went back and forth between the two capitals, to gauge what lies ahead for a relationship that is more dangerously unstable than it has been since 1972, when Richard Nixon clasped Mao’s hand in Beijing, setting the course for China’s opening to the world. I talked to those who forged the relationship, and those who would remake it—in politics, business, security, entertainment, and technology—and found them startled by the depth of the rupture and the speed with which it has grown. “The relationship is in free fall,” a senior White House official told me. Deng Yuwen, a former top editor of a Communist Party journal who now lives in the United States, told me that when he talks to officials in Beijing they spare him the bluster. “They are very, very worried that the relationship will continue to deteriorate, that the economic impact will hurt people’s confidence and further growth, that it could have effects beyond their grasp,” he said.

Some level of tension is endemic. Ever since 1784, when the first American merchant ship landed in China to trade ginseng for tea, the two sides have cycled through what John Pomfret, the author of “The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom,” calls “rapturous enchantment followed by despair.” But the union has always been derived from mutual benefit. Buyers in Canton generated fortunes for the Astor and the Delano families; Christian missionaries built China’s first universities and hospitals. The Cold War pulled the countries apart—the Party feared “Coca-Colanization”—but eventually the People’s Republic needed cash and foreign know-how. On December 13, 1978, Deng Xiaoping announced China’s Open Door policy, inviting in foreign businesses and encouraging Party members to “emancipate



their minds.” Two weeks later, the first bottles of Coke arrived.

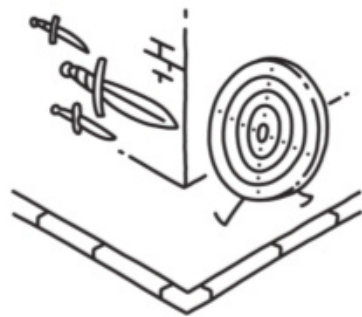
Eight American Presidents, from Richard Nixon to Barack Obama, employed a strategy known as “engagement,” based on the conviction that embracing China politically and economically would eventually make it more profitable and liberal. Despite China’s flagrant abuses of intellectual property and human rights, the strategy enabled the largest trading relationship between any two countries in the world, with an estimated seventy thousand American companies doing business in China today. In 2005, the George W. Bush Administration loosened visa policies, encouraging a huge influx of Chinese students, who now make up the largest group of foreign undergrads in America. Microsoft opened a five-hundred-person research center in Beijing, its biggest lab outside the United States. In speeches to Americans, Communist Party officials adopted a romantic expression more often used in love poems: “There is some of me in you, and some of you in me.”

Donald Trump wants none of that. He has always despised trade deficits. In 1988, when America was flooded with imports from Japan, he told Oprah Winfrey, “They are beating the hell out of this country.” In 2016, as a Presidential candidate, he adapted his talking points to a new power in East Asia. “We can’t continue to allow China to rape our country,” he said, at a rally in New Hampshire. Though he occasionally rhapsodized about strongman rule (“Maybe we’ll want to give that a shot someday”), Trump rejected the basic theory of engagement. “You better start uncoupling from China,” he said, in 2015. “It’s going to bring us down.”

Trump’s idea of “uncoupling”—pushing factories to leave China, reducing the flow of students and technology—was a fringe position, found mostly in hawkish books such as “Death by China,” by Peter Navarro, a fiery economics professor who joined Trump’s campaign as an adviser. But, once Trump was in office, his confrontational approach attracted surprising bipartisan support. American businesses complained that Chinese hackers were stealing trade secrets, that Chinese officials were forcing them to hand over technology, and that state

subsidies to Chinese rivals were making it impossible to compete. American politicians objected to Xi’s brazen round-ups of human-rights lawyers, activists, and ethnic minorities.

In March, 2018, with a tweet declaring that “trade wars are good, and easy to win,” Trump announced sweeping tariffs on steel and aluminum imported from China and other countries. Beijing retaliated, and soon trade was yoked by billions of dollars in new taxes. The



hostilities multiplied. In September, a Chinese warship and an American destroyer came within fifty yards of each other in the South China Sea, the two navies’ worst near-collision on record. Nine days later, Xu Yanjun, an employee of China’s foreign-intelligence agency, was extradited from Belgium to the U.S., on charges of conspiring to steal aerospace secrets. (Xu has pleaded not guilty.) In October, 2019, the U.S. black-listed Chinese technology firms and Party officials for their involvement in the detention of Muslims in Xinjiang. That same month, China turned away an American congressional delegation. “For years, the two were kicking each other under the table,” Minxin Pei, a government professor at Claremont McKenna College, said. “Now all the kicking is out in the open.”

Members of the Trump Administration have taken direct aim at China’s ambitions. Last fall, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that America and its allies must insure that “China retains only its proper place in the world.” During a visit to Europe, he said, “China wants to be the dominant economic and military power of the world, spreading its authoritarian vision for society and its corrupt practices worldwide.” The Administration’s argument, in its bluntest form, frames China as a hardened foe, too distant from American values to be susceptible to diplomacy. In April, Kiron Skinner, Pompeo’s di-

rector of policy planning, said in a public talk, “This is a fight with a really different civilization.” She added that China represented “the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian.” (The comments caused an uproar. In August, Skinner left the State Department.) Behind closed doors, Trump aides dismiss Skinner’s invocation of race. But they also liken China to such sworn enemies of America as Iran and the Soviet Union, and argue that only hard-line pressure can “crush” its expansion.

Half a century after Henry Kissinger led the secret negotiations that brought Nixon to China, he still meets with leaders in Beijing and Washington. At the age of ninety-six, he has come to believe that the two sides are falling into a spiral of hostile perceptions. “I’m very concerned,” he told me, his baritone now almost a growl. “The way the relationship has deteriorated in recent months will feed, on both sides, the image that the other one is a permanent adversary.” By the end of 2019, the Washington establishment had all but abandoned engagement with China. But there was not yet a strategy to replace it.

In the void, there was a clamor to set rules for dealing with China in business, geopolitics, and culture, all surrounding a central question: Is the contest a new cold war?

To some in Washington, after eighteen years of unwinnable slogs in Afghanistan and the Middle East, the prospect of reprising the Cold War—the last major conflict that Washington won—offers the familiar comfort of an old boot. In March, 2019, the Committee on the Present Danger—a group, first formed in the fifties, that encouraged an arms buildup against the Soviets—was relaunched, with a focus on China. Its events have featured Senator Ted Cruz, the former Trump strategist Steve Bannon, and, notably, the former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, Washington’s best weathervane for political opportunity. In October, Gingrich published “Trump vs. China,” his thirtieth book since leaving office, in 1998. Discussing the book at the National Press Club, Gingrich told his audience, “If you don’t want your grandchildren speaking Chinese and obeying Beijing,

then this is a topic we better have a national dialogue about.” He called China “the greatest threat to us since the British Empire in the seventeen-seventies, much greater than Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union.”

For Gingrich and his allies, China is an existential menace, which demands the kind of aggressive military expansion and broad campaign against tyranny that thwarted the Soviet Union. Their bluster belies the fact that the U.S. strategy in the Cold War was largely predicated on avoiding direct conflict. In the opening moments of the Soviet contest—what Orwell warned would be the “peace that is no peace”—Americans faced what appeared to be a Manichaeian choice: appeasement or a world war. The diplomat George Kennan perceived a third option, which he described, in *Foreign Affairs*, as the “firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.” Kennan’s theory of containment became America’s defining strategy in the Cold War.

In September, Odd Arne Westad, a Yale historian, published an essay in *Foreign Affairs* that served as a contemporary sequel to Kennan’s missive. He, too, urged patience. “If the United States wants to compete, it must prepare for a long campaign for influence,” he wrote. When I spoke to him recently, he argued that containment is not an option; China is too rich, and too intertwined with the American economy. But he suggested that Gingrich’s idea of clashing civilizations was also wrong-headed. “The Soviet leaders’ position was that it was necessary to see American power destroyed,” he said. “That’s not China’s game. I have yet to find a single person in the leadership who actually believes that.”

Westad is clear-eyed about the risks of China’s rise, but he is most alarmed by alarmism itself. The leaders of the two countries are both hasty, intransigent, and not very well informed about the other side’s goals. The U.S. wants to preserve its influence and to balance trade. China seeks, above all, to expand its power in East Asia, as Germany did in Europe more than a century ago. “The United States is not necessarily damaged by China retaking its historical place within eastern Asia,” Westad said. But when these kinds of changes

WHAT IS A DIAGNOSIS TO A DEMON

My Gods fast together. Nod in agreement
before relaying results. I stroll around on the verge
of an omg a gasp a wow a why don’t the doctors
jazz it up a bit. Say it’s a delayed overdose,
a you been out here looking for what’s been looking for you.
Turn the heat up. Say there’s something bigger waiting.
Say what doesn’t drown you makes you taller.
Say every new wound is still a regular old wound.
Say you’ll meet a man who’s going to love you
while your body grows with nothing in it.
Tell me he’ll have a voice deeper than demons.
Tell me he’ll be tall like stacked milk crates.
That way he could also be a bedframe.
Could carry decaying vinyl. Tell me
I could shoot a ball straight through him.
Don’t tell me a couple hours before morning break
that it’s just a cyst. A li’l fibroid. A change in diet,
a birth-control pill, and come back next year. My God,
just break me to blood, let me bleed to abandon
on a white couch, from the same cancers
obsessed with all my fat aunties from the South.
I was taught to bring food up to my lips.
For quality assurance, I want all the salt.
I want to drop with the beat.

—Shauna Barbosa

happen too quickly, or when the partisans overreact, the results can be disastrous. “It all depends on timing. That’s what the Chinese have to realize—and haven’t, I think.” He is worried that China and the United States will separate into two distinct blocs, increasingly mistrustful and prone to conflict: “It can happen, as we’ve seen in Europe, in ways that unleash generations of warfare.”

When the parade wound down in Beijing, I walked east—back through security and past Mao’s mausoleum, where farmers from distant provinces still line up at dawn to glimpse his remains, held in a crystal coffin. Then I headed north, toward the lakes that once served as the emperors’ pleasure gardens, but I discovered that police had sealed off much of downtown. Every time I tried to turn, they waved me away. A cop encouraged a cluster of pedestrians to keep going east. “I don’t know where the restrictions end—I just know my area,” he said. I shuffled on, like a mouse in a maze; twenty min-

utes became an hour, then two hours. I noticed that we were being herded along the vanished route of the old city wall, a symbol of imperial anxiety that stood for more than five hundred years, until the nineteen-sixties, when it was removed to make room for modern transportation. As I walked, I took to counting surveillance cameras; there are now an estimated eight hundred thousand in the capital, nearly triple the number in place a decade ago. (In Hong Kong, protesters have attacked the cameras, as symbols of Beijing’s control.)

Every capital city prizes security, but in Xi’s Beijing it has been elevated to a state religion. Chinese leaders, for all their projections of confidence, see peril everywhere: a precarious economy, an aging population, an Arab Spring-style revolt in Hong Kong, an ethnic insurgency. In a speech last year to the National People’s Congress, Premier Li Keqiang mentioned “risk” twenty-four times, twice as many as on the same occasion three years earlier. In 2018, China surpassed the Soviet Union as

history's longest-surviving Communist state, a distinction that fuels both pride and paranoia.

Chinese leaders have been alarmed by American support of popular uprisings—first the “color revolutions” in the former Soviet bloc and then the Arab Spring—and they resent America's efforts to deepen its influence in Asia. In November, 2011, with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan winding down, Hillary Clinton, who was then Secretary of State, announced a plan to “redirect some of those investments to opportunities and obligations” in Asia. As part of the “pivot,” as it was known, Obama expanded America's military presence in Australia, and worked to build the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade agreement among twelve nations—China not among them. “To China, it was an effort to exclude,” Deng Yuwen, the former editor, said. “All of those things appeared to be targeting China from different perspectives—economically, geopolitically, militarily.”

Xi believes that orthodox commitment to Communism is paramount as his country fends off Western influence. In a speech in 2013, he asked, “Why did the Soviet Communist Party collapse?” His answer: “Their ideals and convictions wavered.” In Beijing, an ideological revival is in flamboyant effect. Since June, the Party has been waging an old-fashioned dogmatic crusade, known as a “Correct the wind” campaign. In a modern twist, ninety million Party members have been given an app loaded with Xi's speeches, quizzes about his life story, and videos on history. (The app keeps track of what they finish.) “Xi Jinping thinks the whole place slacked off ideologically,” Geremie Barmé, an independent historian and translator, said. “This campaign is something the Communists have done a number of times when they feel things are a little bit out of control.” Instead of city walls, the Party relies on digital defenses; day by day, censors purify the Internet of subversive ideas, and facial-recognition technologies track people's comings and goings.

Under Xi, market reforms have stalled, and schools have replaced books by Western economists with tracts published by the Marxist Theory Research and Building Project. Some Party élites

question whether Deng Xiaoping's openness went too far. “As the Party returns to the idea that its absolute power is the only thing standing between China and chaos, the United States, and the embrace of markets, is increasingly seen as an enemy,” Westad said.

The more Trump's Washington questions engagement, the more Xi's Beijing perceives a hostile foe. The current leaders, in both places, cast themselves as defenders against humiliation and threats from the outside. In both cities, it has become easier to be a hawk than a voice of moderation.

I visited Yan Xuetong, an influential foreign-affairs scholar at Tsinghua University, who has a kindly laugh that belies the sharp edge of his views. He predicted the emergence of separate, competing economic and political blocs—the polarization that Westad fears. “We will have a two-centered world,” he said cheerfully, “like two yolks in one egg.” I puzzled over the image, trying to make out how such a curiosity would survive. But Yan was pleased with his analogy, and extended it into a distinction between the current scenario and the Cold War. “The relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was like two eggs in one basket—they were separate economically—but this time you have two yolks competing for support from the egg white.” He paused and tried out a different analogy. “Maybe the right term is a duopolistic world—like Boeing and Airbus, two companies in a zero-sum competition.”

I wanted to hear Yan's sense of the protests in Hong Kong, which had expanded into the very kind of unrest that terrifies the government. After four months of street demonstrations against Communist Party control, violence was growing. On the day of the parade in Beijing, demonstrators seeking to overshadow events in the capital clashed with police, and, for the first time, an officer shot a protester with live ammunition. Yan saw no prospect that Beijing would compromise. “Violence will become a common phenomenon,” he said. “Like the Palestinian kids firing on Israeli police, but not as grave.” The comparison struck me as odd, until I realized that, from Beijing's perspective, Israel's sequestering of the West Bank and Gaza has led to an agreeable

scenario: a chronic but confined insurgency that does not threaten the country's over-all security.

Instead of running from confrontation, the Party has rallied around it. Xi emphasizes the importance of “struggle,” and state television has conspicuously rebroadcast old Korean war films depicting battles with American troops. An essay celebrating self-reliance during the starvation of the nineteen-fifties became a viral hit, under the title “A Guide to Eating Tree Bark.”

“The Party believes that, if you take one step backward, everything will unravel,” Barmé said. “The struggle, not the resolution of it, is the way of maintaining unity and primacy.” A struggle properly controlled—in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Washington—can be a political asset. In internal speeches about dealing with America, Party officials call for a precise balance: the goal should be to “struggle but not smash” the relationship—to exploit the tension without letting hostilities get out of control.

Thirty years after Coca-Cola symbolized the arrival of American business in China, the company became a symbol of a darker turn in the relationship. In early 2009, Coke was negotiating a \$2.4 billion deal to buy China Huiyuan Juice Group—the largest-ever foreign takeover of a Chinese company. But, on March 15th, the F.B.I. alerted Coke executives that hackers had broken into their system and were rummaging through e-mails about the negotiation, recording keystrokes, and controlling their computers remotely. Three days later, the talks were dead. Security firms eventually traced the breach to hackers who worked from a twelve-story building on the outskirts of Shanghai: Unit 61398 of the People's Liberation Army.

For as long as the American intelligence community had been online, it had been hacking foreign governments. China did that, too, but its hackers also plundered foreign businesses, looking for an advantage in negotiation, for blueprints to copy, and for other commercial shortcuts. In 2007, agents of the Chinese military hacked the aerospace firm Lockheed Martin and stole tens of millions of documents related to America's most expensive weapons

system, the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. A notably similar Chinese plane, the J-31, appeared soon thereafter. (China denies stealing the plans.) The Chinese hacking of American businesses exposed a deep clash of perceptions: America was starting to see China as a near-peer, intent on flouting rules laid down mostly by the West. But China still regarded itself as a scrappy latecomer, using whatever tools it could to protect and improve the lives of a vast population.

That clash extends far beyond hacking: China has invoked its status as a “developing country” to erect barriers against foreign competitors, and to coerce American companies into sharing technology. Eventually, those practices turned some American businesses from ardent advocates for good relations into fierce critics. When China joined the World Trade Organization, in 2001, it agreed to a schedule for dropping tariffs and opening markets. But that schedule ended in 2006, and so did the momentum toward opening. Arthur Kroeber, the managing director of Gavekal Dragonomics, a research firm in Beijing, said, “Almost immediately, I started hearing complaints from foreign companies about how conditions had changed to create advantages for domestic Chinese firms.”

Chinese leaders resented the idea that they should heed the West’s demands. At a dinner hosted by the American Chamber of Commerce in China, a rising nationalist, Bo Xilai, spoke to foreign executives. “I’d never seen any Chinese leader be so patronizing to that crowd,” John Holden, a former chairman of the chamber, recalled. “He essentially said, ‘You complain a lot, but we know you’re making money here, so just get over it.’” (Bo was later imprisoned on charges of corruption and abuse of power.) When the global financial crisis struck, in 2008, it gave Chinese skeptics of capitalism a powerful argument against American-style reforms.

These days, the most acute standoff between the two countries is over who will dominate the next generation of technologies. Until recently, executives in Silicon Valley tended to belittle China’s potential in tech, arguing that rigid controls in politics and education would constrain radical innovation. But that view no longer prevails. Under a plan

called Made in China 2025, Beijing has directed billions in subsidies and research funds to help Chinese companies surpass foreign competitors on such frontiers as electric vehicles and robotics. A Pentagon report commissioned under Obama warned that the U.S. was losing cutting-edge technology to China, not only through theft but also through Chinese involvement in joint ventures and tech startups. It prompted Congress, in 2018, to tighten rules on foreign investment and export controls.

The technology dispute escalated later that year, when the Trump Administration expanded an attack on Huawei, the world’s largest manufacturer of fifth-generation (5G) networking equipment, warning that the Chinese government could use the equipment for spying and hacking. In December, at the request of the U.S., Canadian authorities arrested Huawei’s chief financial officer, Meng Wanzhou, as she changed planes in Vancouver. Meng, the daughter of the company’s billionaire founder, is known in China as the “princess” of Huawei; when border agents detained her, she asked incredulously, “Because of my company, you are arresting me?” She was charged with committing fraud to help Huawei violate sanctions against trade with Iran. While awaiting trial, she was allowed to live in one of the two mansions that her family owns in Vancouver, worth a combined sixteen million dollars. Days after Meng’s arrest, China detained two Canadians—Michael Kovrig, a diplomat on leave, and Michael Spavor, a consultant—and accused them of stealing state secrets. After more than a year, neither has been permitted to see a lawyer.

In May, the Administration took its largest step yet against Huawei: the Commerce Department blacklisted it from buying American microchips and other technology—a blow to Huawei’s ability to make the smartphones and networking equipment that it sells around the world. And yet the campaign against Huawei has been hampered by the Administration’s diplomatic isolation. The U.S. has asked sixty-one countries to ban Huawei equipment, but only three—Australia, New Zealand, and Japan—have agreed. A European diplomat told me that, despite credible concern about the use of

Huawei’s products in spying, the campaign has been ham-fisted—a demand for us-or-them loyalty at a time “when you’re slapping tariffs on your European allies.”

Senator Mark Warner, of Virginia, the top Democrat on the Intelligence Committee, supports efforts to stop China’s theft of trade secrets, but he calls Trump’s broader strategy “erratic and incoherent.” China’s gains in technology should be “a new Sputnik moment,” triggering huge investment, he said. The U.S. does not have a 5G alternative to compete with China’s, a failure that cannot be blamed on spying. As a share of the economy, America’s federal investment in research and development has fallen to its lowest point since 1955. Warner said, “We’ve always steered away from industrial policy, but we may need to make public-private investments, or government investments, in ‘democracy 5G.’”

If America does not compete with China’s advances, it risks losing a voice in deciding the ethics of some unsettling new technologies. Since 2017, China has erected an unprecedented digital and physical enclosure around Muslims in its Xinjiang region. It is estimated that more than a million people have been interned in facilities known officially as “vocational training centers.” Millions more are tracked every day by facial-recognition cameras, fingerprints, cell-phone patterns, and biometric data, collected through a program of mandatory exams known as Physicals for All. Multiple provinces have taken to collecting DNA samples, in order to “improve population management and control,” as one police notice put it. The prospect of China extending, or exporting, the Xinjiang model has exposed the stakes in the future of intrusive technologies. Warner said, “The situation that’s playing out in 5G will soon play out in facial recognition, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing.”

When Trump first imagined “uncoupling”—or “decoupling,” as it became known—the term evoked a divorce. But a complete decoupling is implausible. “Total revenue of U.S. companies and affiliates in China in 2017, for one year, is five hundred and forty-four billion dollars,” Kroeber told me.

“What’s the chance these numbers can go down eighty or ninety per cent? Almost no chance. We can remove a few of those tangles, but the cost to the U.S. economy of removing them all would be unacceptably high.”

Some companies—Nintendo, GoPro, Hasbro—have accelerated plans to build factories in places such as India, Vietnam, and Mexico. But most American C.E.O.s want more access to China, not less. Amid the trade war, Starbucks announced plans to open three thousand new Chinese stores by 2023—an average of one every fifteen hours. Tesla opened a plant in Shanghai that will build a hundred and fifty thousand cars a year. Elon Musk, the company’s founder, has called the plant a “template for future growth.”

The Trump Administration’s efforts to force China into major concessions have faltered, as U.S. negotiators bickered openly over strategy. In February, both countries were said to be drawing up memorandums of understanding on six major issues, including cyber theft and intellectual-property rights. But, in a meeting with Chinese officials in the Oval Office, Trump undercut his top negotiator, Robert Lighthizer, by disputing the legitimacy of that step. “I don’t like M.O.U.s, because they don’t mean anything,” Trump said. Lighthizer, flustered, said, “We’re never going to use M.O.U. again,” drawing laughter from Chinese negotiators.

Trump’s advisers also fundamentally miscalculated the effect of their actions. In July, 2016, Navarro, who went on to become the White House director of trade and manufacturing policy, predicted that the mere threat of tariffs would force China to capitulate. “The purpose is not to impose tariffs,” he told me at the time. “The purpose is to use the threat of tariffs as a way of getting the attention of any trading partners that cheat, and, basically, encouraging them to play by the rules, knowing that Trump, if they don’t, damn well will follow through on that promise.” A tariff program, he said, is “kind of like the military—if it’s strong enough, then nobody messes with you.” By October, 2019, tariffs had been in place for fifteen months, suppressing investment and weighing on the American economy. The Department of Ag-



“I know the schools are great, but is this really the house we want to ride out the apocalypse in?”

riculture had allocated twenty-eight billion dollars in aid to farmers for lost exports—more than twice as much as taxpayers spent to bail out the auto industry a decade earlier. Researchers estimated that by the year’s end the tariffs would have cost the average U.S. household thirteen hundred dollars.

With a Presidential election a year away, Trump’s trade war was becoming a political liability. The Chinese side was in no rush to resolve it. In September, an American billionaire investor told me that he had advised the President to show progress, if he wanted a strong economy on Election Day. “You have to have a deal done by the end of the year,” the investor said. “If you get a deal in March or April, by then the economy’s already gone.” The next month, negotiators abruptly announced what they called “phase one” of a trade deal. The terms, finalized in December, called for both sides to cut tariffs; China also agreed to buy more farm exports, energy, and manufac-

tured goods from the U.S., in return for which Trump would suspend upcoming tariffs. On Twitter, Trump had hailed it as “the greatest and biggest deal ever made for our Great Patriot Farmers in the history of our Country.” But the truce did not resolve the core disputes, such as technology transfer, and, outside the White House, it was mostly seen as the end of a wasteful stunt. “Trump was looking for any possible excuse not to put on the tariffs that he had threatened,” Kroeber said, “so he got a promise from the Chinese to buy soybeans and some other stuff, and he packaged this.”

In China, the deal was greeted warily, with no expectation that it would relieve the standoff. Chinese analysts have described their side’s approach as *da da, tan tan*—“fight fight, talk talk”—a pointed expression that Mao used in the nineteen-forties to describe his strategy when Americans pressured him to stop fighting the rival Nationalist Army. Mao always assented to their requests for talks,



*"The power went out and I couldn't find any candles,
but I could find your shorts I hate."*

even as he steadily gained ground on the battlefield. In the end, he won.

Chris Johnson, a former C.I.A. analyst who is now a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, asked a group of Chinese contacts what their government got from Trump's push for a deal at any price. "Their response was 'Time,'" he said. "Reading between the lines, they meant time without new tariffs in the near term, and time to prepare for what they presume is an inevitable larger confrontation."

Beijing in July is an open-air sauna, windless and smothering beneath the monsoon clouds. In the summer of 2005, when I moved there, a pale disk of sun barely peeked through the pollution—but, for the teen-agers at my neighborhood basketball court, the game was always on. Smog, sun, rain, it didn't matter: they were vamping, attempting to dunk, swimming in oversized Kobe Bryant jerseys, trying out American *laji hua* (trash talk).

For previous generations, showboating on the court had been so anathema that Chinese basketball teams were barred from keeping statistics for individual players. But the National Basketball Association recognized the surging potential of a China that was opening itself to outside culture. In 2002, a giant

from Shanghai named Yao Ming was the first pick in the N.B.A. draft, and, that year, the league opened its China office, with a single employee. By 2005, surveys of Chinese young people showed that basketball was edging out soccer as the most popular sport. That fall, when I met Mark Fischer, a lanky American running the N.B.A.'s operation in China, he told me, "The sky's the limit for basketball here."

Nearly fifteen years later, much of that prediction is true. China is the N.B.A.'s most lucrative domain outside the U.S.; the China operation has been valued at more than four billion dollars, and star players earn a fortune in sneaker deals. Klay Thompson, of the Golden State Warriors, stands to make eighty million dollars in ten years from Anta, a Chinese brand, according to ESPN. But, last fall, the N.B.A. discovered a limit of a different kind in China. On October 5th, Daryl Morey, the general manager of the Houston Rockets, posted a slogan to his personal Twitter feed: "Fight for freedom. Stand with Hong Kong." He later deleted the tweet, but China's state media had already begun reporting on it, and the stories set off a cascade of outrage. Chinese sponsors pulled funding from the Rockets, merchandise disappeared from e-commerce sites, and state tele-

vision cancelled broadcasts of games. Chinese commenters flooded Morey's Twitter account with angry notes, including "N.M.S.L."—Chinese slang for "Your mother is dead."

Rather than coming to Morey's defense, the N.B.A. issued an obsequious statement in Chinese: "We are extremely disappointed in the inappropriate remarks made by Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey." LeBron James—a frequent visitor to China on behalf of Nike, which makes more than one and a half billion dollars a year there—urged his colleagues to watch their words. He told reporters that Morey was not "educated on the situation," and that his tweet risked harming people "not only financially but physically, emotionally, spiritually." American fans were appalled. Online, people posted images of James's head photoshopped onto hundred-yuan notes.

Ultimately, the N.B.A.'s commissioner, Adam Silver, reported "fairly dramatic" financial repercussions from lost business in China, but he rebuffed a request to fire Morey, and emphasized the league's commitment to free expression. He told an audience in New York, "These American values—we are an American business—travel with us wherever we go." But the N.B.A. kerfuffle exposed a larger phenomenon: China's market had become so crucial to American institutions that they were blandly accepting demands for censorship and submission. When the Eastman School of Music, at the University of Rochester, was preparing for a tour of China, it could not get visas for South Korean students. It discovered that Beijing had blocked visas for South Korean performers since 2016, as punishment for a diplomatic dispute. Instead of postponing the tour, the school decided to leave all the South Koreans home, fearing what the dean called "a negative impact on Eastman's reputation within China." (After a public outcry, it abandoned the tour.)

China is not exporting a state ideology in the manner of the Soviet Union. But it wants to make the world more amenable to its ideology, so it has demanded extraterritorial censorship, compelling outsiders to accept limits on free speech beyond its borders. For years, Hollywood studios have agreed

to cut material from their films to get them into China. “Bohemian Rhapsody,” the Oscar-winning movie about the band Queen, was released in China in 2019 only after it was reëdited to remove any mention of Freddie Mercury’s sexual orientation.

Judd Apatow, the filmmaker and comedian, told me that Americans intended to introduce freedom to China, but instead traded it for Chinese money. “I think it happened very slowly and insidiously,” he said. “You would not see a major film company or studio make a movie that has story lines which are critical of countries with major markets or investors. The question becomes: what’s the result of all of this? The result is, there are a million or more Muslims in reëducation camps in China, and you don’t really hear much about it.”

In October, Quentin Tarantino refused to modify the Chinese version of his film “Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood,” after relatives of the late martial-arts star Bruce Lee complained about an unflattering portrayal of him, so China cancelled its release. Apatow said, “Quentin Tarantino is successful enough, and has the power and final cut, but very few people are in that position of strength. What you don’t hear about is all of the ideas that get killed at the earliest pitch stage, at all of the studios and networks, because people don’t even want to consider dealing with it.”

Accepting censorship for profit rests on the tempting logic that reaching Chinese buyers with a bowdlerized portrait of the world is better than not reaching them at all. In fact, censored imports have helped acclimate Chinese citizens to a parallel reality, in which Freddie Mercury was not gay, and in which nobody in the N.B.A. cares about Hong Kong. When Chinese consumers erupt at something like Daryl Morey’s tweet, it indicates not a growing awareness of what the rest of the world thinks but a growing seclusion from it.

For forty years, the two sides strained to look past their underlying political differences, but, as their contact intensified, ignoring the contradictions became more difficult. By the end of 2019, a web of cracks had appeared throughout domains that were once integrated. At least ten American colleges had closed outposts of the Confucius Institute, a

Chinese-government-funded cultural program. In Beijing, the government had issued an unprecedented order, directing public institutions to remove all foreign computer equipment and software within three years. In Silicon Valley, some companies concluded that entering China had become all but impossible. Last year, Facebook, which had been asking China for years to let it operate there, abandoned the effort. Reed Hastings, the C.E.O. of Netflix, acknowledged the barriers before him, saying, “We will be blocked in China for a long time.”

In Beijing, it often feels as if a universe of ideas is reconstituting itself, with China at its center. I visited Joan Xu, an American screenwriter with an office at a WeWork downtown. She wore a slate-blue silk shirt and jeans, and handed me coffee in a mug with a WeWork slogan: “Do what you love.” Xu’s parents emigrated from China to the U.S. to attend graduate school in economics. She was born in Pittsburgh and raised in Maryland. “I grew up in white suburbs with other lawyers’ and professors’ kids,” she said. In 2003, when she was fourteen, the family moved to Beijing. Her mother became a professor at Peking University, and Xu entered a prestigious middle school, where she had to catch up by learning to read and write Chinese. “Before that, I was very much single-culture,” she said. “Now we were memorizing poems writ-



ten two thousand years ago. That was just mind-blowing to me, coming from an American education, where two hundred years is old.”

After high school, she returned to the U.S. to attend Harvard, where she sang in an a-cappella group and reëmbraced American life. In her application, she described wanting to be “a U.S.-China bridge” who might bring the countries closer together. “Everybody was, like, ‘Oh, this is great,’” she

said. She loved Harvard, where she majored in political science, but a tone in her classes surprised her. “My sophomore tutorial was themed ‘Democracy.’ It was basically a whole year of every famous professor coming in and giving a lecture about why democracy is the only legitimate form of governance.” She told me, “It felt like the political classes in high school in China, where everyone knows it’s propaganda. It didn’t encompass the world I’d known.”

Xu moved back to Beijing in 2012, and eventually started working on co-productions between Chinese and American filmmakers. “It was, like, ‘Oh, this is the future! The two greatest countries producing culture together.’” Her optimism has since waned. “It has become pretty clear in the last few years that the Hollywood-China co-production is not a thing. It still happens financially; it just didn’t happen creatively.” A breaking point came in 2016, with the release of a historical fantasy called “The Great Wall,” directed by Zhang Yimou; it starred Matt Damon as a warrior with Chinese comrades, all fending off monsters. In the hype preceding its release, the producer hailed it as “a new kind of film.” Afterward, *USA Today* judged it “a complete train wreck.” Xu told me, “No one has attempted to do a large-scale creative collaboration like that again.” She went on, “It was already, conceptually, about as middle ground as a blockbuster had gotten. So, it was just, like, ‘O.K., there is no middle ground. Culturally it’s just too different.’” Chinese audiences will watch Chinese movies, or American blockbusters, but the combination doesn’t work.

Xu still wants to be bicultural, but she finds it increasingly difficult to combine both sets of values. “All of my friends who are similar to me in Beijing, in every one of our industries, ‘U.S.-China’ is not a thing anymore,” she said. “We’re basically seen as just China people now.”

Xu told me she is “pro-China,” and I asked what she meant. “Most people who are within the sphere of the West kind of reflexively look at China and see, ‘Oh, wow, totalitarian dictatorship, oppression, no human rights, suffering.’ Just evil, right? To be ‘pro-China’ is simply to realize that’s not right; there is much more going on. It’s not perfect,

but it's just simply an alternative system." She went on, "I would say that the ideals of human rights are not bad to aim for, but it's not a universal, God-given thing. It was something that was consensus-driven at a certain point in Western history. If you look at Chinese social progression, things are genuinely getting better for most people, despite the problems. It's more of a battle of narratives about values."

It's an argument one often hears in Beijing, and also among foreign investors and executives who seek business there. Google developed a prototype of a censored search engine called Dragonfly, which would have blocked thousands of words and phrases, including "human rights" and "student protest." The C.E.O., Sundar Pichai, said, in 2018, "I think it's important for us, given how important the market is and how many users there are." (After protests by employees, Google announced that it had halted work on the project.)

Xi Jinping promotes the view that China's system presents an alternative to free-market democracy—what he has called "a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence." He has found some fertile markets for that view, in an era when Trump has reduced aid spending, separated children from parents at the border, and called migrants "animals."

And yet China's sprint for soft power has been less successful than one might assume. The scale and posture of its new power has aroused a backlash, even in places where it offers the Belt and Road Initiative, a global infrastructure push larger than the Marshall Plan. In Malaysia, which once welcomed a surge of Chinese investment, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has grown concerned about "a new version of colonialism." Mahathir cancelled Chinese projects worth almost twenty-three billion dollars, seeking to avoid the fate of Sri Lanka, which defaulted on heavy Chinese loans and eventually agreed to give Beijing control of a major seaport for ninety-nine years.

When I spoke to Jorge Guajardo, the former Mexican ambassador to Beijing, I mentioned Westad's prediction of a "long campaign for influence." Guajardo told me that, for all of Trump's

harm to the reputation of the U.S., it has not lost the campaign in Latin America, because Beijing's ventures can be heavy-handed or self-serving. Chinese investors have been criticized for importing workers for infrastructure projects, instead of generating local jobs, and for seeking control of large swaths of national territory. "The Soviets were going after the hearts and minds of the local populations," Guajardo said. "The Chinese could care less."

In the contest for hearts and minds, America has no better chance to make its case than to foreign students who come for higher education—including an estimated three hundred and seventy thousand from China in the most recent academic year, four times as many as a decade ago.

Last fall, I spent time with three Chinese undergraduates at American University, on the lush outskirts of Washington, D.C. Xu Tong, who grew up in Harbin, in China's frigid northeast, was still marvelling at how different Washington is from her home—no skyscrapers, few people, old trees. In China's new cities, the trees are spin-dles. "Washington feels like a garden," she said. A generation ago, Chinese students tended to study on scholarship, but now many subsidize the education of Americans by paying full freight. Xu was surprised by the thriftiness of American classmates. "Maybe it's because China is new to money, and everyone attaches great importance to enjoyment, but students here seem to spend very little money," she said. "When we go out, we take Uber, but they take the subway."

Lai Ziyi, who grew up in Jiangxi, in southern China, had assumed that the U.S. capital city would be under intense security. "But there are shooting incidents," she said. When she told her parents, they freaked out, and so Lai scrambled to assure them that her campus is near the Department of Homeland Security. "They said, 'O.K., fine.'"

More than four years had passed since Lai applied to college in America, and the hostilities had startled her. In recent years, the U.S. has prosecuted at least half a dozen Chinese students and scholars for spying or for stealing scientific research. In 2018, Ji Chaoqun,

an electrical-engineering student at the Illinois Institute of Technology, was charged with acting as an agent for China's Ministry of State Security, and accused of trying to recruit spies among engineers and scientists. (Ji has pleaded not guilty.) Christopher Wray, the director of the F.B.I., warned the Senate Judiciary Committee that China has enlisted "nontraditional collectors" of intelligence to "steal their way up the economic ladder at our expense."

Trump offers an impressionistic version of these facts. Discussing China over dinner with C.E.O.s, he reportedly said that "almost every student that comes over to this country is a spy." In 2018, the U.S. government advised university administrators to be vigilant against the theft of biomedical secrets, and it cut the duration of visas available to Chinese graduate students working on advanced technology. Some schools believe the scrutiny is excessive. In an open letter in June, M.I.T.'s president, L. Rafael Reif, wrote that the cases of wrongdoing "are the exception and very far from the rule. Yet faculty members, post-docs, research staff and students tell me that, in their dealings with government agencies, they now feel unfairly scrutinized, stigmatized and on edge—because of their Chinese ethnicity alone."

Lai told me, "My dream was to be a lawyer." But when she tried to combine a degree in law with aerospace or chemical engineering she was advised to look elsewhere. "These are sensitive majors," she said. "If you study for a master's degree, you would get restrictions from the American government." She has no regrets about coming, but the longer she stays in America, the more she feels tempted to recede into a community of Chinese students. It reminded me of some of my experiences studying in China—the tug between loneliness and curiosity, the intensifying effect of life far from home, which can make you more patriotic than you were when you left. Watching the unrest in Hong Kong had convinced Lai that the Beijing government was right to condemn the protesters. "Most of them are just full of violence. And, as a Chinese person from the mainland, I love my country, and I don't think these things should happen anymore."

When Zhao Yuchen arrived in America, last August, he was the only foreign student on his floor, and he cherished the isolation; it helped him make friends with Americans, as well as with students from Japan, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and Mongolia. At nineteen, he is tall and confident. He grew up in Taiyuan, in China's coal country, where his father sold mining equipment. Neither of his parents went to college, but they supported his decision to study in America. "My father doesn't like the Chinese education system," he told me. "He thinks it can't improve my creative thinking."

Zhao wandered the museums run by the Smithsonian, and he savored the sudden absence of control. "It's free," he said. "I can express what I want to say, and I don't need to fear the teacher's reaction." He stayed up late scouring the uncensored Internet for facts about the Cultural Revolution and the massacre at Tiananmen Square. An uncle of his had taken part in the democracy demonstrations, but they'd never talked much about it, he said. In China, he'd asked in school about the demonstrations. "My teacher just told me, 'You're wrong.'"

As he read—about Taiwan, about the war with Japan, about relations with the U.S.—he began to doubt the history he was taught in high school. "It can change my whole attitude toward my Party, if what the books say is true," he said. When he talks with friends back home about his discoveries, they mock him for being "brainwashed by America," he said. "Americans think that free speech and freedom of press is basic for people. But in China we think the community, the country, is the first thing we need to think about. Most ordinary Chinese people don't understand why democracy is so important for America. They'll say, 'Yes, America brings democracy to Iraq, to Afghanistan, to lots of countries. But these countries are getting killed now.' They say, 'We're not democratic, but we live in a peaceful country. We have a good living standard.'" He feels that his countrymen are too quick to dismiss what he loves about life outside. "They've lost their basic ability to think independently, I think."

Spending time with Zhao reminded



"For my next trick, I'll need a volunteer, a fake knife, and a mirrored box with a secret compartment."

me that, for all the failed promise of our bicultural experiment—the train wreck of "The Great Wall," the nationalism that going abroad can foster—the revelations that Chinese people can experience here are too valuable to be forsaken. If America closes its doors to Chinese students, it will not only deprive us of their talent and ambition; it will sacrifice the power of our uncensored world.

In Beijing, I had lunch with Xue Qikun, a quantum physicist who is one of China's most decorated scientists. An elfin figure with a warm, discursive manner (asked for a brief summary of his work, he spoke for thirty-two minutes), Xue worked in Japan and the U.S. before returning to teach at Tsinghua University. He believes that Americans overlook the benefit of their country's reputation as a magnet for researchers. "In addition to our learning something from the U.S. professors, the U.S. pro-

fessors learn something from us," he said. "We have thirty years of hard work and experience." After the Second World War, Xue noted, the U.S. "collected all the best people in the world." Now European postdocs are coming to China to work with him. If the U.S. squeezes out Chinese scholars, both sides will suffer, he predicts. "We can work hard by ourselves—no problem at all—but then you'll lose good people," he said. "If you cut off, you send a big signal to everyone in the world."

The risk of espionage on campus is real. But there is also a risk in Trump's exaggerated talk of spies, the F.B.I.'s warnings of "nontraditional collectors," and the political opportunity exploited by Gingrich and others—a risk that Susan Shirk, the chair of the 21st Century China Center, at the University of California, San Diego, calls "an anti-Chinese version of the Red Scare." China's state press trumpets those moves at every

opportunity (“Spying Bogey Demonizes Chinese in US,” as a headline in the *Global Times* put it), because they advance the Communist Party’s argument that American pressure is born not of reason but of anxiety over a rival that is, in the words of Kiron Skinner, “not Caucasian.”

The closest that China and the United States have come to an actual fight in recent decades was in 1996, in a squabble over the island of Taiwan—the land mine at the center of the relationship. Taiwan has resisted Communist control since 1949, and America has pledged to defend it from attacks. In March, 1996, Beijing, fearing that Taiwan was moving toward independence, fired ballistic missiles into the waters off the coast. President Clinton responded by sending in two aircraft-carrier groups, the largest show of force in Asia since the Vietnam War. Chinese leaders backed down—and started working to prevent such a capitulation from ever being necessary again.

At first, progress was haphazard. In 1998, China bought the rusting hulk of an unfinished Soviet aircraft carrier,

which had been abandoned in Ukraine at the collapse of the Soviet Union, and announced plans to tow it to Macau and turn it into a floating casino and hotel. Instead, the Chinese Navy restored it, and in 2012 commissioned it as the country’s first carrier. Last month, China launched a second carrier, and it is expected to build several more in the next decade.

It has also acquired new missiles, air defenses, submarines, and cyber weapons that can scramble the electrical grids of an opponent. The U.S. still spends more than twice as much on defense each year, but if a similar crisis emerged today China would not need to back down; in war games commissioned by the Pentagon, China routinely wins battles with America over Taiwan. In 2018, Admiral Philip S. Davidson, the head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, told Congress, “China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States.” The risk is not theoretical. In January, in Xi’s first major speech about Taiwan, he said that the island “must and will be” reunited with China eventually, and warned that China reserves

the right to use force against any “intervention by external forces.”

As remote as a clash may seem to Americans, a certain fatalism about the tension has crept into conversation in Beijing. Hu Xijin, the editor of the *Global Times*, told me, “To some extent, it was doomed to happen”—because, he explained, America fears a challenge to its supremacy. Once the trade war began, in the summer of 2018, many in Beijing ascribed it to America’s basic unwillingness to accept China’s rise. The *People’s Daily* declared, “Whichever country becomes America’s most important competitor, America will try to contain it.”

But Shirk traces the roots of today’s conflicts to political decisions in Beijing a decade ago, and the effect they had in Washington. “I don’t buy that it was inevitable, and this did not begin with the Trump Administration,” she said. “What we’re seeing today is the result of specific choices.” In the aughts, China’s President, Hu Jintao, had a weak hold over the politburo; to avoid a repeat of Mao’s dictatorship, the Party practiced “collective leadership,” in which top bosses divvied up powers, from intelligence-gathering to propaganda to the manufacturing of steel. Over time, each sector became an aggressive fiefdom, taking greater risks to win resources and advance China’s ambitions. “Nobody checked anybody,” Shirk said. Parts of China’s vast government “started overreaching to the point that policies have snapped back and harmed the country.”

Chinese hackers, for instance, at the behest of various agencies—military, intelligence—roamed farther and wider. In 2014, they stole the private records of twenty-two million U.S. government employees and their relatives from a server at the Office of Personnel Management. It was more alarming than the usual breach; foreign spy agencies could use those records to identify people who work covertly as U.S. employees, or have secrets that would make them vulnerable to blackmail. The following year, Xi promised Obama to curtail hacking, and it briefly died down, but China’s cyberattacks have since resumed, including “widespread operations to target engineering, telecommunications, and aerospace industries,” according to a 2018 report by the U.S. intelligence community.



“So this is fun—the artist is actually with us tonight.”

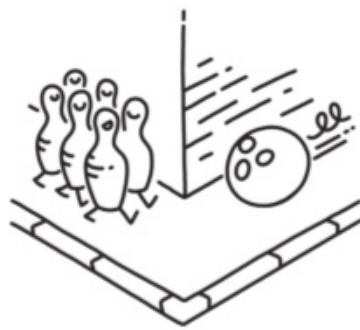
A similar dynamic has played out on China's coast. For years, Beijing coveted control of the South China Sea, for natural resources and strategic terrain. In 2012, it seized a reef near the Philippines called Scarborough Shoal—China's boldest use of force in the area. The Administration considered it a minor diplomatic dispute, and did not want to risk violence in order to push China back. Some national-security officials contend that this leniency encouraged China to make further forays into disputed territory. "‘No-drama Obama’ didn't want any messiness," a former U.S. official said. "Today the Chinese say, ‘We can't believe you didn't react.’" In 2014, China started building artificial islands atop seven reefs in the South China Sea, as markers of territory and staging grounds for weapons. Obama pressured Xi to stop, and, in the Rose Garden, Xi said that China had "no intention to militarize" the islands. But the military construction never ceased; China calls the islands "necessary defense facilities."

China's maneuvers radicalized members of America's national-security community, in a cycle that Shirk calls "overreach and overreaction." Paul Haenle, a retired Army officer and an Asia adviser to Bush and Obama, said, "If you talk to folks in the Pentagon, they say they're no longer debating whether or not China is an enemy. They're planning for war." Haenle, who now directs the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, continued, "That really worries me. It's a change. If you talk about cooperation, you're 'naïve.' Eventually the pendulum has got to swing back, because the key question is: how can we be both a strategic competitor with China and a strategic coöperator?"

The most dangerous frontier between Chinese and American power today is the contested terrain of the Western Pacific: Taiwan, the South China Sea, and a series of shoals and islands that are unfamiliar to the American public. In the South China Sea, the U.S. protests China's claims by deploying warships and jets close to the artificial islands, while Chinese vessels and planes try to scare them off, a game of chicken that has produced, by the Pentagon's count, at least eighteen unsafe encounters since 2016—near-col-

lisions at sea or in the air that could have killed troops. Adding to the risk, the U.S. and Chinese militaries have abandoned some lines of communication, and failed to agree on sufficient rules of conduct at sea, the kinds of measures that prevented minor incidents from escalating into catastrophe during the Cold War.

Johnson, the former C.I.A. analyst, said the United States must make re-



alistic decisions about where it is prepared to deter China's expansion and where it is not. "If we think we can maintain the same dominance we have had since 1945, well, that train has left the station," he told me. "We should start by racking and stacking China's global ambitions and determining what we can't accommodate and what we can, then communicate that to the Chinese at the highest levels, and operationalize them through red lines we will enforce. We're not doing that. Instead, what we're doing are things that masquerade as a strategy but, in fact, amount to just kicking them in the balls."

By the end of 2019, nearly two years into the new era of confrontation, China and America were moving steadily toward a separation that is less economic than political and psychological. Each side had embraced a form of "fight fight, talk talk," steeling for a "peace that is no peace," as Orwell had it.

But Henry Kissinger considers America's contest with China to be both less dire and more complex than the Soviet struggle. "We were dealing with a bipolar world," he told me. "Now we're dealing with a multipolar world. The components of an international system are so much more varied, and the lineups are much more difficult to control."

For that reason, Kissinger says, the more relevant and disturbing analogy is to the First World War. In that view, the trade war is an ominous signal; eco-

nomic polarization, of the kind that pitted Britain against Germany before 1914, has often been a prelude to real war. "If it freezes into a permanent conflict, and you have two big blocs confronting each other, then the danger of a pre-World War I situation is huge," Kissinger said. "Look at history: none of the leaders that started World War I would have done so if they had known what the world would look like at the end. That is the situation we must avoid." Westad agrees. "The pre-1914 parallel is, of course, not just the growth in German power," he said. "What we, I think, need to focus on is what actually led to war. What led to war was the German fear of being in a position where their power would not strengthen in the future, where they were, as they put it in the summer of 1914, at the maximum moment."

On each side, the greatest risk is blindness born of ignorance, hubris, or ideology. If the Trump Administration were to gamble on national security the way that Navarro did with his botched predictions on trade, the consequences would be grave; if Xi embraces a caricature of America determined to exclude China from prosperity, he could misperceive this as his "maximum moment."

The most viable path ahead is an uneasy coexistence, founded on a mutual desire to "struggle but not smash" the relationship. Coexistence is neither decoupling nor appeasement; it requires, above all, deterrence and candor—a constant reckoning with what kind of change America will, and will not, accept. Success hinges not on abstract historical momentum but on hard, specific day-to-day decisions—what the political scientist Richard Rosecrance, in his study of the First World War, called the "tyranny of small things."

To avoid catastrophe, both sides will have to accept truths that so far they have not: China must acknowledge the outrage caused by its overreaching bids for control, and America must adjust to China's presence, without selling honor for profit. The ascendant view in Washington holds that the competition is us-or-them; in fact, the reality of this century will be us-and-them. It is naïve to imagine wrestling China back to the past. The project, now, is to contest its moral vision of the future. ♦

TABULA RASA

Volume One.

BY JOHN MCPHEE

TRUJILLO

By the way, did you ever write about Extremadura—and when you made that trip with Tim and Wendy did you go to Trujillo?

Dear Jenny: I didn't go there with Tim and Wendy. We drove from France straight to northern Portugal through Castilla la Vieja—Valladolid and Salamanca—and back the same way a few weeks later. Extremadura, though—just the name of it and its remoteness in the Spanish context—had some sort of romantic appeal to me from the first time I ever heard of it, which was probably when I went to Madrid and spent a couple of weeks in Jane del Amo's apartment, in 1954. I was so beguiled by Extremadura that I started writing a short story called "The Girl from Badajoz." With respect to publication, she stayed in Badajoz. But try saying "Badajoz" in castellano. It's beautiful. When you were five years old, in midsummer, we went south to north across Extremadura in our new VW microbus. It was the first time any of us had ever been there, and those were two of the hottest days of all our lives. Fahrenheit, the temperatures were in three digits. Only the oaks were cool in their insulating cork. Rubber flanges surrounded each of the many windows in the VW bus, and the cement that held the rubber flanges melted in the heat, causing the flanges to hang down from all the windows like fettuccine. We stayed in a parador in Mérida that had been a convent in the eighteenth century. Next day, the heat was just as intense, and we developed huge thirst but soon had nothing in the car to drink. Parched in Extremadura—with people like Sarah and Martha howling, panting, and mewling—we saw across the plain a hilltop town, a mile or two from the highway, and we turned

to go there and quench the thirst. The roads were not much wider than the car; the national dual highways, the autovías, were still off in the future. The prospect seemed as modest as it was isolated—just another Spanish townscape distorted by heat shimmers. A sign by the portal gate said "Trujillo." We drove to it, and into it, and up through its helical streets, and finally into its central plaza. There—suddenly and surprisingly towering over us—was a much larger than life equestrian statue of Francisco Pizarro, conquistador of Peru, this remote community his home town.

THORNTON WILDER AT THE CENTURY

At *Time: The Weekly Newsmagazine*, my editor's name was Alfred Thornton Baker, and he was related in some way to the playwright and novelist Thornton Wilder. Spontaneously, one morning at the office, Baker appeared at the edge of my cubicle, and said, "You need a little glamour in your life—come have lunch with Thornton Wilder." We walked seven blocks south and one over to the Century Association, where Wilder had arrived before us. Baker may have been counting on me to be some sort of buffer. I was about thirty but I felt thirteen, and I was moon-, star-, and awestruck in the presence of the author of "Our Town," "The Skin of Our Teeth," and "The Bridge of San Luis Rey." I had read and seen those and more, and had watched my older brother as Doc Gibbs in a Princeton High School production of "Our Town." I knew stories of Wilder as a young teacher at the Lawrenceville School, five miles from Princeton, pacing in the dead of night on the third floor of Davis House above students quartered below.

"What is that?"

"Mr. Wilder. He's writing something."

About halfway through the Century lunch, Baker asked Wilder the question writers hear four million times in a life span if they die young: "What are you working on?"

Wilder said he was not actually writing a new play or novel but was fully engaged in a related project. He was cataloguing the plays of Lope de Vega.

Lope de Vega wrote some eighteen hundred full-length plays. Four hundred and thirty-one survive. How long would it take to read four hundred and thirty-one plays? How long would it take to summarize each in descriptive detail and fulfill the additional requirements of cataloguing? So far having said nothing, I was thinking these things. How long would it take the Jet Propulsion Lab to get something crawling on a moon of Neptune? Wilder was sixty-six, but to me he appeared and sounded geriatric. He was an old man with a cataloguing project that would take him at least a dozen years. Callowly, I asked him, "Why would anyone want to do that?"

Wilder's eyes seemed to condense. Burn. His face turned furious. He said, "Young man, do not ever question the purpose of scholarship."

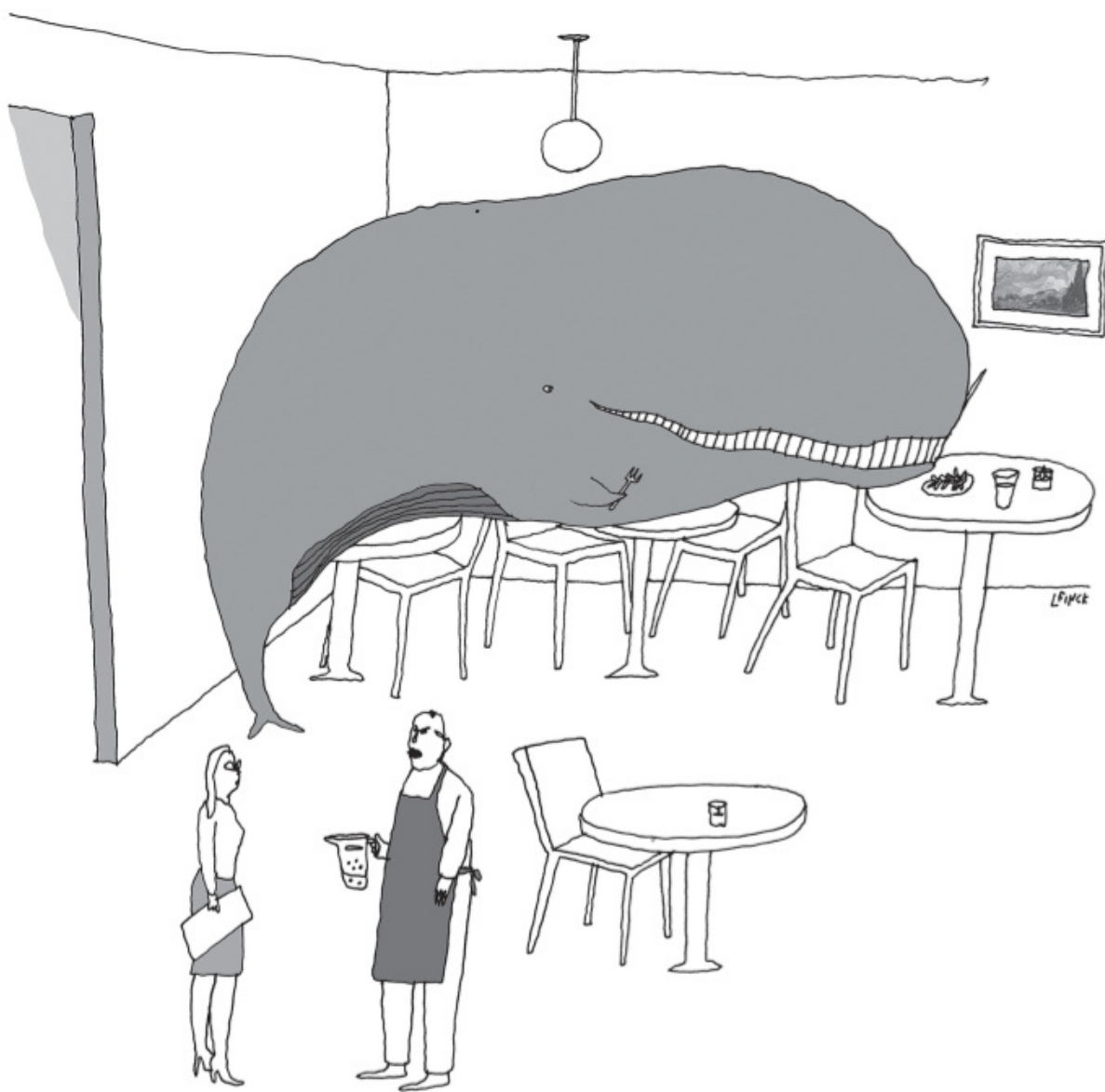
I went catatonic for the duration. To the end, Wilder remained cold. My blunder was as naïve as it was irreparable. Nonetheless, at that time in my life I thought the question deserved an answer. And I couldn't imagine what it might be.

I can now. I am eighty-eight years old at this writing, and I know that those four hundred and thirty-one plays were serving to extend Thornton Wilder's life. Reading them and cataloguing them was something to do, and do, and do. It beat dying. It was a project meant not to end.

I could use one of my own. And why not? With the same ulterior motive,



I decided to describe saved-up, bypassed, intended pieces of writing as an old-man project, the purpose of which is never to end.



"I can't take it. She comes in here, monopolizes three tables, and just orders krill."

I could undertake to describe in capsule form the many writing projects that I have conceived and seriously planned across the years but have never written.

By the way, did you ever write about Extremadura?

No, but I'm thinking about it.

At current velocities, it takes twelve years to get to the moons of Neptune. On that day at the Century Association, Thornton Wilder had twelve years to live.

THE MOONS OF METHUSELAH

George H. W. Bush jumped out of airplanes on his octo birthdays. Some people develop their own Presidential libraries without experiencing a prior need to be President. For offspring and extended families, old people write books about their horses, their houses, their dogs, and their cats, published at the kitchen table. Old-people

projects keep old people old. You're no longer old when you're dead.

Mark Twain's old-person project was his autobiography, which he dictated with regularity when he was in his seventies. He had a motive that puts it in a category by itself. For the benefit of his daughters, he meant to publish it in parts, as appendices to his existing books, in order to extend the copyrights beyond their original expiration dates and his. The bits about Hannibal and his grammar-school teacher Mrs. Horr, for example, could be tacked onto "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," while untold items from his river-pilot years could be appended to "Life on the Mississippi." Repeatedly, he tells his reader how a project such as this one should be done—randomly, without structure, in total disregard of consistent theme or chronology. Just jump in anywhere, tell whatever comes to mind from any era. If something distracts your memory and seems more

interesting at the moment, interrupt the first story and launch into the new one. The interrupted tale can be finished later. That is what he did, and the result is about as delicious a piece of writing as you are ever going to come upon, and come upon, and keep on coming upon, as it draws you in for the rest of your life. If ever there was an old-man project, this one was the greatest. It is only seven hundred and thirty-five thousand words long. If Mark Twain had stayed with it, he would be alive today.

When I was in my prime, I planned to write about a dairy farm in Indiana with twenty-five thousand cows. Now, taking my cue from George Bush, Thornton Wilder, and countless others who stayed hale doing old-person projects, I am writing about not writing about the dairy farm with twenty-five thousand cows. Not to mention Open Doctors, golf-course architects who alter existing courses to make them fit for upcoming U.S. Opens and the present game—lengthening holes, moving greens, rethinking bunkers. Robert Trent Jones was the first Open Doctor, and his son Rees is the most prominent incumbent. Fine idea for a piece, but for me, over time, a hole in zero. So I decided to describe many such saved-up, bypassed, intended pieces of writing as an old-man project of my own.

After six or seven months, however, I felt a creeping dilemma, and I confided it one day on a bike ride with Joel Achenbach, author of books on science and history, reporter for the *Washington Post*, and a student from my writing class in 1982. Doing such a project as this one, I whined, begets a desire to publish what you write, and publication defeats the ongoing project, the purpose of which is to keep the old writer alive by never coming to an end.

Joel said, "Just call it 'Volume One.'"

"HITLER YOUTH"

Many decades ago, I played on a summer softball team sponsored by the Gallup Poll. Our diamond was on the campus of Princeton University, and one of my teammates was Josh Miner. Years passed, the softball with them, and I did not see Josh again

until 1966, when he invited me to go with him to Hurricane Island, in Penobscot Bay.

Josh had been a math and physics teacher, a coach, and an administrator at the Hun School, in Princeton, and by 1966 had been doing much the same at Phillips Academy, in Andover, Massachusetts. Meanwhile, though, he had gone to Scotland to teach for a time at Gordonstoun, on the Moray Firth, near Inverness. The founder and original headmaster there was Kurt Hahn, who had been the headmaster of Salem, a school in Germany, where he developed an outdoor program teaching self-reliance and survival in extreme predicaments. Fleeing the Nazis in the nineteen-thirties, he brought the program to Gordonstoun, and during the Second World War he set up a version of it in Wales that taught ocean survival skills to merchant seamen, who were being lost in great numbers from torpedoed ships. Lives were saved. Hahn called his program Outward Bound and continued to teach it at the school.

Josh came back from Scotland with it and became Outward Bound's founding director in the United States. After Colorado and Minnesota, Maine's Hurricane Island was the third Outward Bound school established in this country. In 1966, it was two years old. I was in my second year as a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. Josh hoped that our stay on Hurricane Island would motivate me to write either a profile of Kurt Hahn, with Outward Bound a significant component, or vice versa.

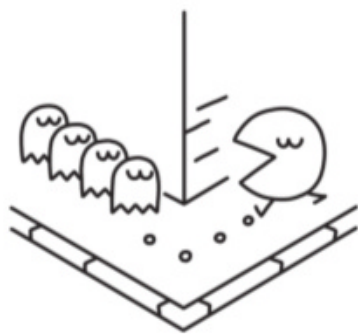
On the way home, I stopped in New York to present these possibilities to William Shawn, to whom I have alluded as *The New Yorker's* supreme eyeshade. I described the Outward Bound curriculum and told him about the solo, when students go off completely alone for a couple of days and nights and eat only things they are able to forage. On Hurricane Island when we were there, Euell Gibbons—a lifelong forager of wild food, the author of a best-seller called "Stalking the Wild Asparagus"—was teaching students what to look for on their solos (less of a problem in Penobscot Bay than, say, in the Estancia Valley of New Mexico, where Gibbons's boyhood foraging in years of extreme drought had kept his family

alive). It had been my good luck that Shawn was particularly dedicated to long pieces of factual writing, but my luck for now ran out. Shawn was having nothing of Outward Bound. He compared it to the Hitler Youth. He said Euell Gibbons sounded interesting, and suggested that I do a profile of Gibbons instead. Which I did, going down the Susquehanna River and a section of the Appalachian Trail—eating what we foraged—in November of that year.

THE BRIDGES OF CHRISTIAN MENN

Sinuuous, up in the sky between one mountainside and another, the most beautiful bridge I had ever seen was in Simplon Pass, on the Swiss side. It fairly swam through the air, now bending right, now left, its deck held up by piers and towers, one of which was very nearly five hundred feet high. A bridge I saw in Bern, also in stressed concrete, was strikingly beautiful and reminded me of the one at Simplon. I was in Switzerland through the autumn of 1982, having arranged to accompany in its annual service the Section de Ren-seignements of Battalion 8, Regiment 5, Mountain Division 10, Swiss Army. When I returned to Princeton, toward the end of November, I couldn't wait to see my friend David Billington, a professor of civil engineering, who was absorbed by the art in engineering and the engineering in art.

Breathlessly, and pretty damned naïvely—thinking I was telling him



something he might not know—I said I had seen a bridge at Simplon Pass that was a spectacular work of art and another in Bern that reminded me of it. Puzzlingly, because he wasn't speaking in print, he said, "They are bridges of Christian Menn." Christian Menn, he explained, was a Swiss structural engineer unparalleled in the world as

a designer of bridges. Moreover, Billington continued, he had a remarkable coincidence to reveal, given where I had been and what I had seen. While I was with the Swiss Army and admiring the structures of Christian Menn, he, Billington, had presented at the Princeton University Art Museum an exhibit of scale models of the bridges of Christian Menn. He'd be happy to show me the models.

Shortly afterward, Billington published a book called "The Tower and the Bridge: The New Art of Structural Engineering," with a picture of the Simplon bridge on the dust jacket. He brought Menn to Princeton to lecture on—what else?—bridges. Menn was a professor of structural engineering at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, in Zurich, where Albert Einstein got his diploma in math and natural sciences, where the mathematician John von Neumann got his in chemical engineering, and where the Chinese-born paleoclimatologist Ken Hsü got his umlaut.

Menn's Felsenau Viaduct, in Bern, was scarcely eight years old when I first saw it, his bridge at Simplon only two. In years that followed, I would come upon the Bunker Hill Memorial Bridge, over the Charles River, in Boston, pure magic with its optical pyramids of cables coming down from its towers directly to the deck (a so-called cable-stayed bridge), and the soaring Sunniberg Bridge, in the canton of Graubünden, and more bridges designed by Christian Menn. He finished his lecture at Princeton with blueprints and conceptual drawings of the bridge of a lifetime, an old-man project outdoing the plays of Lope de Vega or jumping out of airplanes. This was a cable-stayed suspension bridge crossing the Strait of Messina, between Sicily and the Italian mainland. At two miles, its central span would be the longest in the world, three-quarters of a mile longer than the span of the incumbent, the Akashi-Kaikyo Bridge, in Japan, which connects Kobe with an island in Osaka Bay. Back in the day, the Roman Republic developed plans for a bridge across the Strait of Messina. The Repubblica Italiana may get around to it in two or three thousand years.

Having conceived of the largest

bridge in the world, Menn went on to compete for one of the smallest. Princeton University was completing a group of four science buildings, two on either side of Washington Road, which belongs to Mercer County and bisects the Princeton campus in a dangerous way. The danger is to drivers who might run over students, who, staring into their phones, characteristically ignore the heavy traffic, not to mention the traffic lights, and seem to look upon Washington Road as an outdoor pedestrian mall. The four buildings house the labs and classrooms of Physics and Chemistry, on the east side of the road, and Genomics and Neuroscience, on the west. A footbridge would, among other things, save lives. This was not a rialto over Monet's lily pads. Crossing the fast vehicular traffic, it had four destinations. Professor Billington offered the university an immodest suggestion. Since the footbridge design was in such need of an elegant solution, why not engage one of the greatest bridge designers in the history of the world? The university said that if Billington's Swiss friend was interested in the job he would have to enter a competition like everybody else. Menn was interested in the job, and he took part in the competition. Oddly, he won. His footbridge is shaped like a pair of "C"s back to back:)(. The two sides flow together at an apex over the road, and its four extremities diverge, respectively, to Neuroscience, Genomics, Physics, and Chemistry.

For every time I cross that bridge on foot, I cross it about a hundred times on my bicycle. More often than not, as I go up and down its curves, I am reminded not only that this wee bridge—along with the Ganter Bridge, at Simplon, and the Felsenau, in Bern, and the Sunniberg, in Graubünden, and the Bunker Hill Memorial, in Boston—is one of the bridges of Christian Menn but also that I have never written a lick about him, or about David Billington, or a profile of Billington containing a long set piece on Menn, or a profile of Menn containing a long set piece on Billington, or a fifty-fifty profile of them together, which I intended from my Swiss days in the Section de Renseignements

through the decades that have followed. David Billington died in 2018, as did Christian Menn.

THE AIRPLANE THAT CRASHED IN THE WOODS

After dark on a May evening in 1985, I was driving home from work and was about half a mile up the small road I live on when my way was blocked by a pile of tree limbs, wires among them, ripped from utility poles. Drizzly rain was falling through light fog. I stopped, stepped out, and tried to see if there was a way to get past without being electrocuted. I heard a sound in the woods like the wailing of an animal, which is what I thought it was, although I had heard all kinds of animals wail-

ing in those woods and this was not like them. There was no way to proceed. I turned the car around, went back a short distance to a neighbor's house, and called the township police.

I returned to the wires and the tree limbs, and had scarcely stopped, or so it seemed, when a police car followed me, and two officers got out, heard the wailing sound, and went into the woods. They were Jack Petrone, the chief of police, and his son Jackie. Jack had been a basketball player in high school. So had I—same high school, three years apart. He came out of the woods before long, leading and supporting a woman with a severely damaged leg. A calf muscle had been stripped from the bone and hung down in a large flap like a cow's tongue. Jack tossed to me

THE BODY

1

A small animal, perhaps an otter,
darted under our wheels.
My wife was driving.
No time to swerve.
I sensed no impact.
She braked. I scrutinized
the tarmac for blood.

Nothing, not a scrap of fur,
though the road seemed to hum,
alert as skin to the touch.

Reek of pepper and must.

Pent-up hush of late summer.

Behind a scrim of willows,
a glint seemed to slip backwards.

2

Before we were born
we found ways not to exist,
happily, playfully,
thriving on no-fish
a billion billion years
before the universe exploded.

No one missed us,
we didn't miss ourselves.
There was no absence.

3

Leery of ticks,
we part ash leaves
and here's the Gihon River,
an ant clinging stoically
to a frayed petal, a bee
flying gamely underwater.

4

Evening. We won't come back
to this angle of scorched tar,
logged forest choked with brush,
Canada hunched behind a bluff.

A farmhouse lights as we watch—
porch, then kitchen, like a toy.

You can hear a child intoning
the score of a jump-rope game
solemnly, with sleepy urgency,
as if blurting out a secret,
every syllable held and slurred
in the loud shush of current.

Radio signals link galaxies
but we're so close
all we know of ourselves
is the blur of an eyelash.

After us, the white line, the wall of pines.

—D. Nurkse

a roll of adhesive bandage, said, "Put that back in place," and returned quickly to the woods.

In my youth, I was particularly squeamish about blood. When I was in college, I fainted while donating it. Now I had been told to put a detached calf muscle back where it came from, which I did, as gently as I could. The woman it belonged to bravely kept the pain to herself. Her home was in Hopewell Township, several miles west, and I did not know her, or her husband, or the couple they were travelling with, one of whom was the pilot of the Cessna they had crashed in. He was the worst hurt, mainly trauma to the head, and he was the reason for Jack Petrone's hurried return to the woods. It seemed incredible, but everyone survived.

The two men and two women had been playing golf in Myrtle Beach. Their Cessna was based at Princeton Airport, a small field for light planes, three beeline miles northeast of the crash site. The pilot was flying under Instrument Flight Rules, with foul weather all the way from South Carolina to New Jersey. The I.F.R. route from Myrtle Beach to Princeton proceeded northeast from waypoint to waypoint and not at all on a beeline. After the waypoint nearest Trenton, the I.F.R. route went north before doubling back for Princeton, adding about fifty miles to the journey. Princeton is ten miles from Trenton. The pilot gained permission to bank right, abandon his I.F.R. flight plan, and go for Princeton under Visual Flight Rules. V.F.R. required, among other

things, that he not fly in cloud and that his minimum horizontal visibility be about three miles. The elevation of Trenton is forty-nine feet. The elevation of Princeton Airport is a hundred and twenty-five feet. The wooded ridge I live on is four hundred feet high.

The weather cleared, and for a week after the crash the air above our road was filled with light aircraft—not actually a swarm, like mosquitoes looking for blood, but quite a few of them, rubbernecking, perhaps apprehensively, curious to discern whatever they thought they could discern. A few days later, in a Princeton restaurant, a couple my wife and I knew named Daphne and Dudley Hawkes stopped by our table as they were leaving. Dudley, an orthopedic surgeon and a pilot of light aircraft, wanted to know everything we could tell him about the accident on our road. All I could tell him would become what I have written here.

Four months later, Dudley took off from Robbinsville Airport, near Trenton, in a rented Mooney 201 on his way by himself to Parents' Day at Hamilton College. He plowed into an embankment beside Route 130, and died.

Daphne was an Episcopal priest, the first of her gender in New Jersey. In 1984, she had spent three hours with my writing students at Princeton University, whose assignment for that week was to interview her as a group and then individually write profiles of her. The result would be sixteen varying portraits built from one set of facts. Daphne parked her car close by, on Nassau Street, and after she left the classroom and returned to the car she got into a shouting argument with a woman in the next parking space, who thought her vehicle, in some fender-bending or related way, had been threatened by Daphne's. The heat rose, crescendoed, strong words flying, until the offended woman shouted, "Would I not tell the truth? Would I lie to you? I am a rabbi."

Daphne was wearing a wool vest that closed high in the manner of a turtle-neck. She reached up with one finger and pulled it down, exposing her clerical collar.

A few years later—at an event in Trenton honoring Senator Bill Bradley—the two women were brought together again, one to give the invocation,

the other the closing prayer. Someone asked them, "Have you met?"

Daphne said, "We've run into each other."

The people from Hopewell Township who crashed on our road sued Cessna for—as I understood the complaint—not making a cockpit of sufficient structure to withstand the forces that injured them. I was subpoenaed to testify. There would be a deposition in my office in East Pyne Hall, on the Princeton campus. My office was not a boardroom. It sorely lacked space for me, two lawyers, and a court stenographer. We were crowded in there for upward of an hour, and I learned early on that I was meant to testify but not to tell a story. I was bubbling mad. How could anyone even imagine suing Cessna for Cessna's role in the crash? As the court stenographer tapped along, I tried to say as much, but was quieted by the lawyers as my words were inserted edgewise.

This seemed to be a story to tell, to investigate, to amplify, to enrich with detail about flight rules, liability law, aircraft design, women priests, women rab-

bis, and varying portraits of one subject by sixteen writers, but beyond this brief outline the disparate parts of "The Airplane That Crashed in the Woods" seemed as resistant to the weaving and telling as they had been with an audience of two lawyers and a court stenographer.

ON THE CAMPUS

When I was nine, ten years old, I knew where every urinal was on the Princeton campus. They are among my earliest memories. There were so many of them that they also represent the greatest sources of instant gratification that I have ever known. We (there were others like me) also knew where the pool tables were, and went from place to place until we found one free of students. Most of all, I dribbled my outdoor basketball across the campus and down the slate walks to the gym, where we went in the front door if it was open and in a basement window if not. The campus gradually absorbs a campus rat. When I was ten, and after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, I soon got into

an air-spotter course taught in a lecture hall in the Frick Chemistry Lab. My grade school, which has since become a university building, was close by and on the same street. The main purpose of the course was to train people to identify Nazi warplanes seen above New Jersey, and to report them by telephone to the regional headquarters of the U.S. Army Ground Observer Corps. The trainees were, for the most part, middle-aged women and little boys. We, the latter, were not in much need of the training, being completely familiar, from magazines and books, with the styles and silhouettes of the world's military airplanes. But the course was fun, like some precursive television show, as the black silhouette of an aircraft came up on a large screen and was gone two seconds later while you were writing down its name. Messerschmitt ME-109. Next slide, two seconds: Mitsubishi Zero. Next slide, two seconds: Grumman Avenger. Next slide, two seconds: Vought-Sikorsky Corsair. Yes, the American planes were the only planes we would ever report to regional headquarters, in New York or somewhere, in a cryptic sequence from a filled-in, columned sheet: "one, bi, low," and so forth—one twin-engine plane flying low, often a DC-3 descending to Newark. We saw Piper Cubs, Stinson Reliants, and more DC-3s. We saw Martin Marauders, Curtiss-Wright Warhawks, Republic Thunderbolts, Bell Airacobras, Lockheed Lightnings, Consolidated Liberators. It would be treason to say that we were eager to see Heinkel HE-111s and Dornier DO-17s. We didn't really know what was going on. We were ten, eleven years old and not regarded as precocious.

I can't see fish in a river, but I could see airplanes in the sky, and what I wouldn't have given for an ME-109, as long as it was destroyed after we made the phone call. In case the British attacked, we were prepared to identify them, too. Next slide, two seconds: Supermarine Seafire. Next slide, two seconds: Supermarine Spitfire. What a name—the aircraft that won the Battle of Britain. Bristol Beaufort, Bristol Beaufighter, Hawker Hurricane, Hawker Typhoon, de Havilland Mosquito, Gloster Gladiator, Vickers Wellington. But we were there because we knew from Fokker, and Fokker from



"Oh, my God—it's got pockets!"

Focke-Wulf. Ilyushin, Tupolev, Lavochkin, Mikoyan-Gurevich. Next . . .

The middle-aged women were people with cars, who could drive the little boys to country sheds and shacks set up by the Aircraft Warning Service, a civilian component of the Army's Ground Observer Corps. I don't mean to downsize the women or their role in all this, but—Mrs. Hall, Mrs. Hambling—they didn't know a Focke-Wulf 200 from a white-throated sparrow. They were totally frank about it and relied on us to name the planes. Mrs. Hambling, who was English, picked me up at school. I rode my bike to Mrs. Hall's house, a beautiful place on Snowden Lane. They both took me to a very small hut on the edge of a farm near Rocky Hill, and drove me back to Princeton hours later. I still have my "AWS" armband—red, white, blue, and gold, with wings.

When I was in high school, I worked for the university's Department of Biology, in Guyot Hall. It was a great job, not only for its variety but because I could make my own hours, riding there on my bicycle to do preset chores. This allowed me to hold a job and also to be on Princeton High School's basketball and tennis teams. For Professor Chase—Aurin M. Chase, a biochemist—I copied scientific papers. This was years before Xerox. There were no photocopiers. The papers were copied by a photostat machine, which took pictures of them on photographic paper, which, in a photographic darkroom, was immersed, one page at a time, in a fluid called developer. You gazed down into the fluid and watched as words and images chemically appeared. Professor Chase taught me how to do that. It was slow going. Even to copy a relatively short paper, "Proc Nat Ac Sci"—"Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences"—could take the better part of an hour. For Professor Arthur Parpart, whose principal interest was in the physiological and biochemical architecture of red-blood-cell membranes, I cleaned the beef blood out of his centrifuge. I stuffed wads of cotton into my nostrils. After beef blood has been centrifugally subdivided and left in metal test tubes awhile, its smell could level a city. During the recent world war, a research project he directed helped increase the maximum storage time of human blood

from three days to thirty. From Professor Gerhard Fankhauser, I learned to smell the difference between alcohol and formaldehyde, a useful talent in Princeton. In Professor Fankhauser's lab were many large jars—glass, heavy, maybe fourteen inches high and about that in diameter—containing marine specimens. Starfish. Octopuses. Vicious-looking eels. Each jar had a glass lid like a manhole cover, sealed with beeswax. Some specimens were in alcohol, others in formaldehyde. Gradually, despite the beeswax, the fluids in the jars would go down and need to be topped up. My job was to open a jar, sniff the contents, replace the alcohol or formaldehyde, seal the jar with new beeswax, and move on to the next jar.

When I was fourteen, a recurrent vision would enter my mind as I drowned fruit flies in the Guyot basement. This is what happens when you die: In the immediate afterlife, you are confronted by every macroscopic creature you killed in your earthbound lifetime. They have an afterlife, too. They come at you as a massive crowd, which, in my case, would consist of ants, mosquitoes, yellow jackets, houseflies, fruit flies, horseflies, spiders, centipedes, cockroaches, moles, mice, shrews, snakes, trout, catfish, sand sharks, walleyes, wasps, rabbits, ticks, lampreys, leeches, ladybugs, beetles, centrarchids, annelids, American shad, Atlantic salmon, honeybees, hornets, Arctic char, Pacific salmon, pike, pickerel, porcupines, caterpillars, butterflies, bluefish, moths, mullet, perch, suckers, fallfish, and bats, not to mention road-killed squirrels, raccoons, pheasants, and deer. They envelop you like a cloud, a fog that bites.

To be sure, I was still in the up phase of growing up, but, while the fruit flies went on dying, the spiritual concept did not. Did Goliath have a second chance at David? Did Hamilton have another shot at Burr? Did the unknown German meet the Unknown Soldier? I wouldn't want to be some people I knew in bush Alaska. When they, lying in bed at night, saw a leg or a proboscis coming through the webbing of a net around them, they pinched the leg or the proboscis and pulled it out of the mosquito on the other side. I wouldn't want to be Ian Frazier. He wolfs down living mayflies. The University of Pennsylvania once gave him a box of chocolate-

covered insects, which some regarded as an honorary degree. In his benign and gentle manner, he is broadly looked upon as a type who would not hurt a flea, but I would not want to be that flea.

I killed the fruit flies for Kenneth Cooper, whose lab was up on the second floor, where he and his wife, Ruth, geneticists, raised them in half-pint glass milk bottles. Each bottle had a few centimetres of gelatinous cereal at the bottom, and was stoppered with a wad of cotton. In this environment, a generation of *Drosophila melanogaster* would develop quickly. The Coopers anesthetized them, shook them out under amplifying glass, and recorded the varying colors of their eyes. They scraped up the sleeping generation and returned it to its birthplace. The fruit flies woke up and jumped around. I took them downstairs to a janitorial closet in trays, a hundred and forty-four bottles in a tray—conservatively, three thousand fruit flies per tray. There was a big sink, deeper than wide, in the closet. One bottle at a time, I removed the cotton wad and held the bottle under a stream of falling water. I poured the dead flies into the sink to ride off into the Princeton sewer system, then removed the gelatinous cereal with a long iron fork. I was not expert at any aspect of this procedure. The janitors hated me. In each generation of flies, an estimated twenty per cent got away while I was handling them. I nonetheless murdered most of them, and I am not ready to face them.

As it happens, my office today, seventy-five years later, is in Guyot Hall—actually, on the roof of Guyot Hall, in what I have elsewhere described as a fake medieval turret. Guyot is and was shared fifty-fifty by Geology and Biology. My turret belongs to Geosciences—the department that took me in as an enduring guest when the building I previously worked in was evacuated for complete refurbishment. My father's principal office on the campus was in the building next door. Looking down from my arrow-slit windows, I can see it.

THE GUILT OF THE U.S. MALE

My high-school class was graduated in the McCarter Theatre, on the Princeton campus—pomp, circumstance, the whole eight yards. Prizes were given. There was one—a

hundred-dollar check from a sponsoring bank—for the academically top-ranked boy. Under my mortarboard, under my tassel, suddenly rich, I was the top-ranked boy. I was sixth in the class. Estella Groom, the top girl, got a hundred dollars, too. Ann Durell, Nancy Cawley, Patricia McCabe, and one other, whose name I don't remember, got nothing. Of the five, I remember where all but one went to college. Wellesley. Mount Holyoke. Albertus Magnus . . . At some point, years later, I could have tracked them down, described their careers and families, and apologized. It didn't cross my mind until I had met Thornton Wilder.

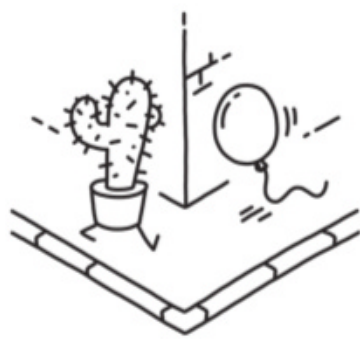
EXTREMADURA

Jane was exactly halfway in age between my father and me. She was my father's first cousin, and my first cousin once removed. In Ohio, she grew up Jane Roemer. As a Hollywood actress, she was Jane Randolph. After marrying a rich Spanish man, she was Jane del Amo. They lived in Madrid, and also had a house on the Castilian coast west of Santander. I met her when I was twenty-three and was spending a grad year at the University of Cambridge. There were three eight-week terms in the Cambridge year. This astonished me—a university on vacation more than half the year. I spent those long vacs in Austria, Portugal, and, for the most part, Spain.

I met Jane for the first time early one April morning, after I had spent an almost wholly sleepless night sitting in a train compartment. She picked me up at a Madrid station and said we were going to lunch near Toledo, and we drove south. Full of energy, she was also full of talk, and no shy cousin would ever be too much for her. In Toledo, she stopped long enough to take me through the Casa del Greco and comment on the effects that astigmatism can have on works of art. Then on we went to a ranch by the River Tagus where friends of hers raised fighting bulls. In a couple of Land Rovers, we rode with four or five others among the fighting bulls. Before they meet their fate, they must never see a dismounted human being, but it was all right to get next to them in Land Rovers. One of our number was a poet whose name I think I re-

member as Rocio Marega, but I can't find her on the Internet or anywhere else, and Jane is no longer here to tell me. Sufficiently distant from the nearest fighting bull, we stopped by the river, got out, and sat down on the right bank to listen as the poet recited her poetry. Behind us not far was the view of Toledo, a low hump and a comparatively unaspiring tessellation of rooftops, seen from where El Greco did not see it that way. The poet was extremely good-looking, and her words came over us in a Spanish so slow, rhythmic, and lush that I almost understood them and almost fell into the river. We adjourned for lunch, indoors, in a U-shaped villa, at a long table that could have seated twenty. Afterward, the men got up, went into a hallway, and came back with shotguns. They went into the courtyard framed by the U and pointed the guns toward the sky, and one of them fired into the air. A cloud of pigeons came up from the roofs on either side. Bang, pow. Bang. Pow. Pigeons rained down at our feet.

I spent that summer in Spain, with other American students, driving around in a surplus Jeep from the Second World War that I had bought in London. Moving slowly from Spanish town to Spanish town in the absence of bypassing four-lane highways was an experience that is now as defunct as the Underwood 5. No cell phones, no G.P.S., no computers. Town after town, you went in through



the outskirts among increasingly compacting streets and into the Centro, the Plaza Mayor, then out in the same manner. There was no alternative. Kids ran along beside the Jeep shouting "El hay, el hay, el hay!" El Jeep. In the historical regions and kingdoms of Iberia, today leadenly called "autonomous communities," we went to Aragón, Navarra, Vizcaya, León, Castilla la Nueva, Castilla la Vieja, Valencia, Murcia, and Andalucía, but not to Extremadura. My

friends preferred playing basketball in Granada to watching cork oaks breaking no sweat.

Extremadura is larger than Maryland and somewhat smaller than Vermont and New Hampshire combined. It is the exact size of Switzerland. After the 1967 trip with my family, when we traversed Extremadura south to north on our way to visit Jane and Jaime at Suances, near Santander, I kept thinking about Extremadura as a subject for a piece in *The New Yorker*, the sort of thing I would actually do about Alaska, Wyoming, and the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. I kept thinking of the storks in the church towers of almost every Extremaduran town. I kept thinking of the cork of those oaks—six inches thick. I kept thinking of the dehesa, the vast dry woodlands with fighting bulls in them and jamón ibérico hogs, and trees spread out like checkers on a board. I proposed the idea to William Shawn, and he said, "Oh. Oh, yes." But I went to Alaska. I went to Wyoming. And although I had been obsessed with the subject since 1954, I never took my notebooks to Extremadura.

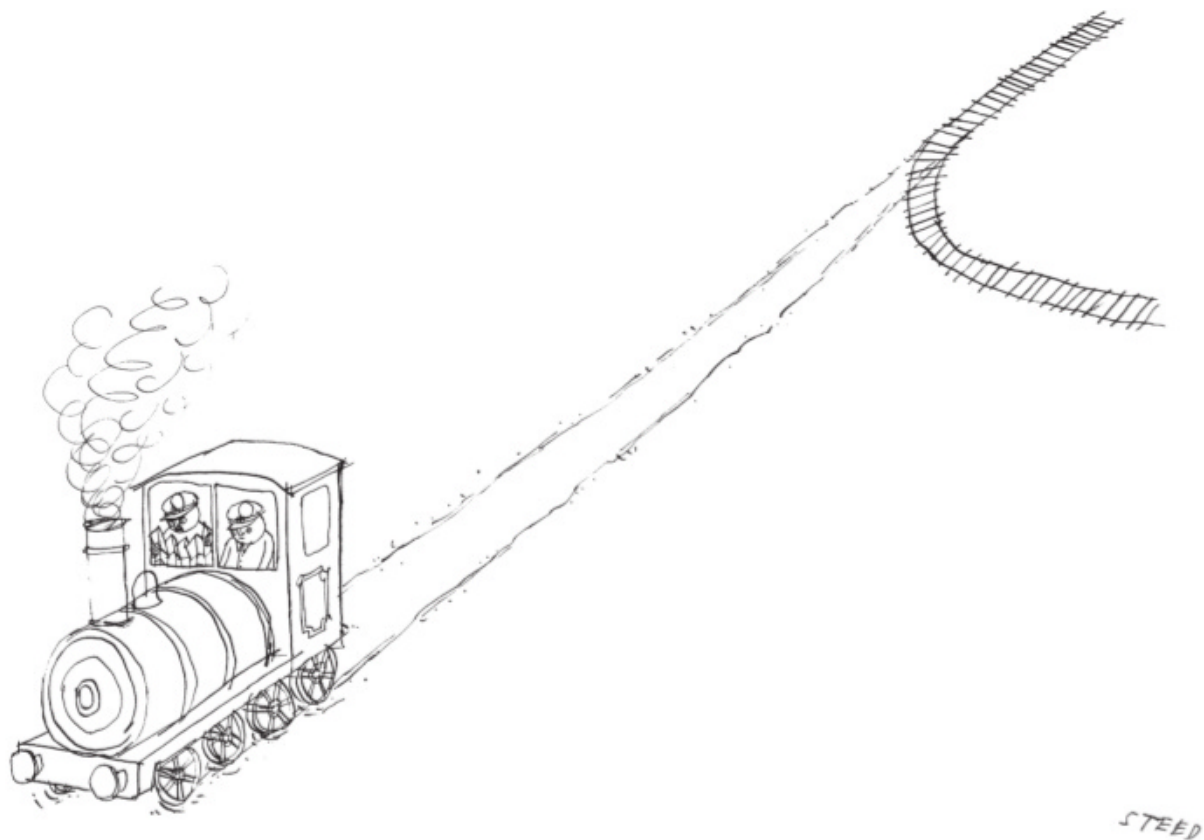
I did make a trip there in 2010. My daughter Jenny was living in London and invited us to join her family on a short vacation in—of all places—Trujillo, in Extremadura. Jenny's husband is Italian, and they would be visiting another international couple (American-Spanish), who were friends in London and had a house in a rural setting on Trujillo's outskirts. My wife, Yolanda, was booked to visit other daughters in the opposite direction, so I went to Spain alone. We were three generations there, from three countries. The fossil layer included specimens from New Jersey, Vermont, and Madrid. The American-Spanish couple were Jake Donovan and Gracia Lafuente, whose father, Jaime Lafuente, was the restoration architect of the Museo del Prado. He was warm and fascinating, as was the whole scene. In small units—Jenny and I, Jenny and I and her fourteen-year-old son, Tommaso, Jenny and I and Gracia—made day trips on multiple vectors to towns and small cities of Extremadura. In Trujillo, we went to a compact, elegant restored house that had been the boyhood home of Francisco de Orellana, born in Trujillo in

1511. Pizarro, still on his horse in the Plaza Mayor, might have moved over. In December, 1541, on a mountain stream in the Andes, de Orellana and a crew got into a small boat and travelled east, downstream, intent to see where the current would take them. After eight months, it had taken them to the Atlantic Ocean. En route, they had built a larger boat—a brigantine—appropriate for the ever-widening waters, and they were attacked by a tribal force that included women warriors. There was education aplenty on the brigantine. In Greek mythology, warrior women were known as Amazons. That was the first known journey from mountains to mouth through the Amazon watershed.

In a plaza in Jerez de los Caballeros, a village in southwestern Extremadura, is a statue of Vasco Núñez de Balboa. His home town. He, too, could move over. Jerez de los Caballeros was the home town of Hernando de Soto, about twenty years younger and also born in the late fifteenth century. When Balboa “discovered” the Pacific Ocean, in 1513, he claimed all of it for Spain. De Soto began his exploration of North America in 1539. Always looking for gold, he travelled extensively in what is now the southeastern United States, and eventually crossed the Mississippi River—the first European to do so. He succumbed to fever on the western bank. De Soto and Balboa both died in their middle forties.

A little younger than Balboa and a little older than de Soto was Hernán Cortés, who made vassals of the Aztecs. Cortés was born and reared in Medellín, province of Badajoz, in Extremadura. Wikipedia, in reference to this sixteenth-century bloom of conquistadores, says of Extremadura that its “difficult conditions pushed many of its ambitious young men to seek their fortunes overseas.” You can wik that again. Who would not think twice about living out a life on this remote, landlocked, desiccated ground?

Well . . . Roman soldiers. Mérida, the capital of Extremadura, was the capital of Roman Lusitania two thousand years ago. The city was founded as a retirement and long-term-care center for the Fifth and Tenth Legions. The name Mérida derives from the Latin *emeritus*. Not that the Romans all just sat around.



“I think you were right—we should have taken a left back there.”

Tommaso, Jenny, and I had lunch in the peristyle of an extant Roman villa in Mérida, and afterward walked on the longest Roman bridge remaining in the world, its arches crossing the Guadiana River. Two Roman dams in tributary streams still hold back the two Roman reservoirs. A Roman aqueduct stands high but dry. Amphitheatre. Circus maximus. Triumphal arch. Temple of Diana—its length divided by eight evenly spaced Corinthian columns, its width by six. You walk among all this, look up, and expect to see the legionnaires.

Deriving from the Arabic *wadi*, for “valley,” the “Guad” in Spanish geographical names denotes a river—Guadiana, Guadalupe, Guadalete, Guadalquivir (Wadi al-Kabir). The Guadiana flows west across Extremadura through Mérida and Badajoz before bending south and eventually forming part of the boundary between Spain and Portugal all the way to the Atlantic. The Sierra de Guadacanal straddles the Extremadura-Andalucía border, and the village and valley of Guadacanal are on the Andalusian side. The name went to the Solomon Islands in 1568, and, in 1942, into the vocabulary of everyone on earth who was even faintly aware of the events of the war in the South Pacific. Albuquerque, northwest of Mérida and close to Portugal, lost an “r” on its way to New Mex-

ico. In the sixteenth century, Chile was known as Nueva Extremadura. The place-name itself—Extremadura—is pretty much the same in Latin and in Spanish: the outermost hard place.

According to Juan Perucho and Néstor Lújan’s “Libro de la Cocina Española,” “the cuisine of Extremadura is serious, deep and austere, as suits the country.” On the final day of that 2010 visit, we went into central Trujillo seeking some of this austerity: partridge braised with truffles, leg of goat pacense, chitterling stew, gazpacho richer in contents than its Andalusian counterpart. We sat at outdoor tables, Pizarro looking on. And when the last partridge was et, the last bit of Badajoz goat, I handed the waiter a Visa card. He disappeared and after fifteen minutes had not returned. Thirty minutes. He was away almost an hour, and, when he returned, he handed me the card and said that Visa had rejected the charge. I produced a different card, and later called the bank whose number was on the first card. A sudden efflorescence of attempted charges against my card had attracted their attention, including a large attempted purchase in South America. While Francisco Pizarro, plunderer of Peru, larger than life, looked on from his commensurate horse, I was being plundered in his home town. ♦

Douglas Stuart
Found Wanting



I was ashamed of my glasses. They were the cheapest of government-subsidized frames, the type that poor pensioners wore, or middle-class students, when they wanted to appear ironic. The lenses were so thick that my green eyes looked jaundiced and only half the size they actually were. I never wore them when I should have. So I can't quite picture the Solicitor's face, but his car was black and German. It glided through the Glasgow smirr like a starling.

I waited for him outside Central Station, as his letter had instructed me to. It was another dreich day, and my stiff denims sucked up the damp from the pavement. The car was so new that the rain streamed off the coat of polisher's wax. As I sat in the passenger seat, I had a peripheral sense that the man had an ordinary face, thin and forgettable. It was edged by a fresh haircut, short on the sides, feathered on the top. Without my glasses, everything was aura, and his aura was the color of liver paste.

The Solicitor had begun writing to me a few weeks earlier. He was among the first to respond to my lonely heart. He was more forthright than the others. His letters gave the impression of a man who cut across the grass, could not be bothered with the path. In his first letter he said we had to meet. He said he liked my description, was excited to see me. I reread my personal ad. Less than thirty words, the vaguest of outlines: slim boy, dark-haired, seventeen, likes music, good books. Yet he seemed so sure that I was the one he had been looking for.

Now here I was in his German car in the Glasgow rain. He told me he was thirty-eight and asked if I was hungry. Then he asked if I had told anyone where I was going. I shook my head, rain on the tip of my nose. I had told no one. I had no one to tell.

I had been living in the rented bedsit for a few months by then. My taciturn brother called it "that Paki woman's home for lonely auld bastards." But I loved it. It was the first time I had felt free to be myself.

Our mother had not been dead long. She was never cold in the grave, because we could not afford to bury her. Instead she was cremated at the expense

of the Benefits Office, out at Daldowie Crematorium. The sober members of her A.A. chapter stood respectfully to the side. The other alcoholics shuffled around us, already inebriated at ten in the morning, or still drunk from the night before—it was hard to say. The old Catholics told me, over and over, that she was safe in the arms of God now. But why was it that she had to go to Him? Where were His arms when she lay mortal and suffering on the living-room carpet?

One of my mother's drinking cronies, a needling terror of a woman, stumbled over to us. She joked that we had been brave to cremate our mother, that she was such an auld soak the flame might never go out. It's hard to know the correct thing to say at a funeral. I could feel my brother's hand on the back of my scrawny neck. He kneaded my vertebrae as if they were rosary beads. He pinched them in his muffled rage, his long fingers threatening to paralyze me, make me a cripple in my borrowed black suit.

After her cremation, the ghouls lingered. The news spread that we would not have a reception with an open bar—in fact, we would not have alcohol at all. There was a disgraceful wailing amongst the worst afflicted. We were told that it was tradition, as if it would be the shame of all Glasgow to burn our mother and not take a good drink to celebrate.

Even as a young woman my mother had always been a gallus thing: a chan- cer, gregarious, desirous of any shiny bauble. She was often too proud and generous to a fault. She trusted men she should not have, which left her with the constant shame of having been used. Toward the end she had a withered quality, somehow stuck in another time. But she had been a handsome woman, with her pronounced Donegal bone structure, glossy black hair always shellacked into a crown of neat ebony rosettes. She liked a fully painted face, even on the days she sat at home. Men loved her. Women grew to be exhausted by her.

No one who knew her could tell me when her taste for a "rare-tear"—the love of a good time—became the actual tearing of her. It is Glaswegian to like a good drink, to get blootered, pished, steamboats, absolutely fucking rat-arsed. When Thatcher took all the

men's jobs away—steel, coal, ships—there seemed little else to do between dole checks. Heavy drinking was hard to avoid—I watched her try—so when someone tipped over into alcoholism it was difficult to pinpoint the beginning of the end. But everyone agreed: her drinking worsened after my father left her. I never knew my father. The stories they tell about him are less tender.

I had been lucky to find a room in Missus B.'s bedsit. The Pakistani woman had been the only landlady willing to rent to a shook-looking boy who was still in high school. My older brother was a tradesman, and, being practical, he thought I should give up on education, as he had, as my mother had. He thought I would benefit from a living wage, an apprenticeship, a council flat, a girlfriend. It was good advice. But I knew I needed an education—I didn't know why. Still, I felt that if I didn't move toward something then I might disintegrate. My brother was my keeper. But after a time he could no longer afford to house me, clothe me, feed me, just for me to see where the adventure of education went.

My quiet brother had always been my protector and harbored me when my mother was at her worst. In his unassuming way, he had carried the mantle of my absent father when he was still a young man, far too hurt himself to care for a vulnerable boy. Later, when I told him I was gay, he was crushed. Living on a Glaswegian housing scheme and being gay was a death sentence. The year before my mother died, the P.Y.T., the Pollok Young Team, had tried to kill me. I was stopped in the middle of a busy street one afternoon. Eight boys bounced up and down on my skull. I was told they had lined up excitedly, as if it were a fairground ride. The old woman who intervened had thought they were torturing a stray dog. My brother felt that he had not done enough to make me normal. That he had not done enough to save me from myself.

I went to high school in the daytime, lost myself in Hardy, du Maurier, Donne. In the evenings and on weekends, I worked the cavernous aisles of a home-improvement superstore, cleaning up spilled paint, carrying patio furniture out to the long cars of middle-class families. Every Friday, I delivered a rent envelope filled with crumpled notes and

loose coins. On my knees before Missus B.'s letter box, I breathed in the rich smell of chicken bubbling in garam masala, listened to women gossip in a pretty language I didn't understand. Then I returned to the bedsit and locked myself in my room.

When the pubs reached barring time, and the old men who rented the rooms on either side of mine stumbled home drunk, I flinched awake in my bed. I listened to them miss the toilet as they pissed, collide with the hallway door that always stuck on the threadbare carpet. I felt euphoric relief. Relief that these alkies were not mine to save.

There were personal ads in the back pages of a youth magazine, a glossy that I devoured because the nights were too quiet and I could not afford the company of a television. Underneath the heterosexuals were the tentative notices for young gay men and women. There was nothing seedy about these lonely hearts—these were not the explicit offers I would trawl later in the free gay papers. This was the early nineties, long before the Internet, with its miles and miles of headless torsos, all hairless and strangely similar—there was nothing sexual here. It was a beacon for invisible youth. I was lonely. I had been lonely for a long time. These boys were lonely, too. This was why we were gathering here—beneath the straight people.

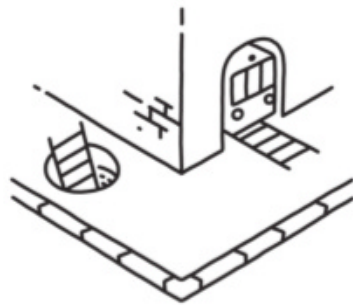
GLASGOW LAD

M—17, Discreet, Not Out
Black Hair, Green Eyes, Slim Body
Likes: The Smiths, Michelle Pfeiffer,
Thomas Hardy, Ab Fab
Shy
Looking for same
P.O. Box 33541

I sat cross-legged on the end of my single bed and summarized my pale, dull self in thirty words or less. The postal order would mean I had no bus fare, that I would have to walk to and from school for a week, but I didn't care. I wrote the advert and lay back, feeling, for the first time in a long while, giddy with hope.

The young men who replied to me came from all over the country. Some of their letters tried too hard to be funny, and were caustic-sounding, masking awful hurt. Some presented a thin ve-

neer of cockiness, as though this was just a laugh to them, yet here they were, sitting cross-legged in bedrooms, reaching out to strangers—same as me. Other letters were vulnerable, heartbreakingly tender. There was one from a boy who was younger than I was, a crofter's son who lived in the remotest corner of the Scottish Highlands, not another soul for years and miles. He wrote as though



he assumed he was not going to receive a reply; he asked me no questions, he didn't hurry me to respond like all the others did. It read like a message in a bottle. I could picture him climbing the side of a munro—the type of majestic mountain they painted on tins of tourist shortbread—and calling out across the empty glen, yet to hear the echo.

All the letters were handwritten, torn from notebooks, charming in their regional slang. Their scrawl rushed across the page, as if the words were burning out of them. Some letters were ten, twelve, twenty pages long, ink changing color as pens bled to excited deaths. The boys sent photographs of themselves, innocent time-stamped *supa-snaps*: holiday pictures with grandparents folded to the back, or photographs of them grinning in bedrooms whose walls were plastered with posters of Kylie Minogue, Madonna, "Cats," the musical.

I laid all the letters out before me. It was hard to see the night sky from the middle of the leaden, sullen city. My mother had taken me to Saltcoats once, to the shingled coast. A man who was using her had rented a dented caravan so they could be farther from his wife. He would come on the weekend, but we would have the week to ourselves. On our first night alone, we sat outside the caravan as she smoked, and watched the stars peek through the heavy clouds. The letters felt like this to me. I would never reach these boys,

never touch them, but they shone, bright in the northern sky. It was enough to know they were there.

I had shaved my face to meet the Solicitor—shaving was not something I had to do often. The gas meter in the shared bathroom was greedy, it gobbled all my coins and gave out only a basinful of tepid water. I slathered my face in white foam and took care not to cut myself. I was a slow developer, and at seventeen I was wan and skinny. My dark hair hung to my chin. I parted it in oily curtains, and wore it tucked behind my ears because it irritated the roary acne of my cheekbones. I felt as if I lived in black polyester trousers, only ever switching my school uniform for my work uniform. The rest of my clothes my mother had bought, dressing me like the man she would have wanted to marry.

The Solicitor drove me to the nicest restaurant I had ever been in. It sat in the shadow of the uplit cathedral and its fieldstone walls were whitewashed and as cold as a tomb. The starched tablecloths looked intimidatingly expensive and made me worry about the cost, but he seemed to sense this, and said almost immediately that I should eat what I wanted, that tonight our date would be on him.

It was the first real date I had been on; the one time before, at fourteen, I had tried to take a Protestant girl to the cinema, to be part of a brood of boys I was desperate to fly with. We had barely made it past the previews when she upped and sat in the row ahead of me, next to her friend, who was having her face chewed by a boy whose mother had melted iron marks into the sleeve of his nylon shell suit. Throughout the film she sucked on her ponytail and peered back at me in a curious way, as if she had a sense of something being wrong but could not say quite what.

It was clear the waiter thought I was the Solicitor's son. The waiter was not much older than me. He had the refined accent of the university students who came to Glasgow and thought it a magical place, full of Gothic spires and the romance of rheumy diseases. But it was a city he could leave whenever he liked—and eventually he would, they all did. I didn't wear my glasses to din-

ner, weak eyes were for old women, not young men, and I worried about squinting unattractively at the menu. I remember trying to pretend to read it as the waiter and the Solicitor stared at me, my empty eyes gliding back and forth in pantomime, and then, when the time came, I tried to appear nonchalant and ordered the exact same thing as my father, my date.

It was chicken. I don't remember everything we talked about as we ate. I do remember the Solicitor did most of the talking, asking about high school, about my plans after school, and I was suddenly excited to realize that I didn't know what my future was, only that it held something, finally, maybe. He kept saying, "Wow, you have your whole life ahead of you," in a voice that sounded a little sad, but I couldn't see if he was actually sad or not.

He asked me if I wanted wine—he wouldn't drink because he was driving—and although I said no (I was fearful of alcohol), he took it as shyness. He ordered a glass of something deep and red that absorbed all the candlelight. He pushed it across the table toward me. I drank it even though I disliked the dank and foustie taste. I didn't want to appear unsophisticated. He ordered another glass, and as it coated the roof of my mouth and stained my buck teeth I found myself relaxing. He said I had a funny smile, not bad, just gap-toothed and sweet. My brother said I was always too quick to smile—I still am—hobbled by my need to have everyone around me feel at ease, and think that I am doing O.K., even when I am not. I raised my hand to cover it.

As we shared dessert, the Solicitor leaned in, asked if he could do something. I nodded slowly, unsure of what to expect. He came toward me in the candlelight, and one of the most enduring pictures I have of his face is of his concentration as he reached behind my left ear and caressed my earlobe, as though he were tucking my hair behind it. I was rigid with inexperience. I saw him pull his hand away, and on his fingertips perched something white, like a small dove, as if he were a magician. My eyes were wide with wonder. But he wiped his hand on his napkin, snuffed the little dove and pressed it

flat. I blinked as he laughed. I had sat through dinner with a glob of shaving cream on my neck, dangling just below my earlobe. I wanted so badly to run. To have the tapered candle topple and engulf me in its flame. But the man simply chuckled. He paid the bill and stood up abruptly.

Once we were outside, my upturned hand cupped some falling rain and I smeared it on my neck—a hoor's bath, my mother would have called it. As we walked back to his car, the man must have felt my reluctance. I started to haver, my tongue loosened with wine, and I thanked him for dinner and made excuses about school in the morning. He walked ahead of me, whistling as though he had not heard. We reached the car and I spoke in the firmest voice I could manage. I said I'd walk home. But the German car flashed twice as he disabled the alarm, and as he turned to me he said, "Ach, but it's early yet. Come. Meet my friends."

He had not mentioned friends before and I had imagined him friendless, lonely like the men and boys in all the other letters I'd received. I didn't want to meet these friends. He did not say who they were. I wanted to walk home, back to Missus B.'s bedsit, and

lock myself inside. But it felt wrong to let him pay for my food and not go. Boys like me were raised with a profound shame at feeling beholden; we were taught that it was better to do without. The man opened the passenger door for me. I wiped the last of the shaving foam from my flushed neck. I smiled a smile I did not feel as my damp denims squeaked against the perforated leather.

I could count on one hand the number of times I had been out of Glasgow. My entire universe was the housing scheme that I'd grown up on. If a place could not be reached on an orange corporation bus, then I had never been. He drove quickly, without telling me where we were going. I wanted to appear worldly, in control of myself, so I laid my throbbing head against the glass and squinted at the motorway signs for Edinburgh. *Edinburgh!* It was only forty miles away, and I had never been. I was scared, but underneath my fear I was buzzing. The traffic moved quickly at this time of night. The rain-dappled windscreen was a constellation of orange and red. The car settled into fifth gear, and the Solicitor put his hand on my leg. I liked it. I liked the



"So they overturn the call—then what?"

possessiveness of it, how it weighted me down. I hadn't realized how tired I was until his hand grasped me. I felt as if I had been found somehow. I watched the slower cars fall away.

We drove for an hour. I was disappointed that the housing estate we ended up at looked similar to the ones in Glasgow; boxy, brutalist buildings, thin windows that were always fogged with damp—if not outside, then inside. But it was unmistakable, I was far from home. There was sea salt in the air, and sleepless seagulls were birling in the darkness overhead. The Solicitor hurried between the buildings. It all looked the same to me, but he led me into an anonymous block of flats. We climbed to the top floor and he opened a plain door without knocking.

There were eight teen-age boys in the small living room, and two girls. They were crammed onto mismatched furniture, their long limbs so intertwined I couldn't tell which limb belonged to which body. Two of the boys were bare-chested and sat with their arms locked around each other. Several bodies were strewn across the carpet, their heads resting on balled-up jumpers, necks bent as if they were broken. They were drinking filmy tea,

smoking hand-rolled cigarettes. The room was littered with greasy dinner plates and empty bottles of fortified wine; a roasting tray lay in the middle of the floor, and on it was the picked-over carcass of a small chicken. Every set of eyes was turned to the television, a late-night broadcast where the English presenters were drunk and swore and everything descended into anarchy. None of the young men were talking. They barely looked up as we entered the room. They greeted the Solicitor like he was nothing special.

A short blond boy, no more than eighteen, stood up and kissed the man. He stood on his tiptoes, and kissed him quickly on the mouth, already looking away, already bored. His hair was shorn in a Caesar cut, his fringe gelled against his forehead in the most perfect horizontal line. He studied me closely, then peered at the man, and chided him, "Ye'll get the jail for that!" The Solicitor held his hands out to show he was free of guilt, to prove there was no trace of me on his palms. He gave the blond boy a plastic bag. It contained three bottles of Irish Baileys, which elicited a whoop of sincere delight. The Solicitor followed him into the kitchen. He left me standing by the door.

A skinny boy pushed himself into the far corner of the settee and beckoned me to sit down. His shoulder blades protruded as though they were the stubs of once powerful wings that had been removed. I sank between the strange bodies, embarrassed by my damp clothes as their warmth swallowed me. I tried to talk to them, introduce myself politely, but they ignored me. There was a sameness between us, they didn't find me interesting enough to talk to, wanted nothing from me. A girl curled her tiny, dirty feet in my lap, and slowly their bodies absorbed me completely.

We sat, slack-jawed, and watched Nick Cave perform; he looked uncomfortable to be on such an awful television show. Eventually, the blond Caesar brought us mugs of instant coffee, made lukewarm and sickly with too much perfumed liqueur. The Solicitor was grinning, and I knew in that moment they had been kissing in the kitchen—perhaps more—and I was surprised to find myself feeling spurned. The man patted my knee, asked if I was all right, and I nodded, smiled, lied. He sat in an armchair and a young man rose from the floor. He was dressed in football shorts and a tracksuit top that bunched like a paper bag. The undersides of his white sport socks were grimy with dirt. He sprawled across the Solicitor's lap and slurped his coffee; his inner thigh was as creamy as condensed milk. Several times the Solicitor bounced him, shoogled him as though they were on a country bus, father and son, but the young man only hissed, elbowed him to quit it, his heavy eyes never leaving the television. I watched the boys. All they seemed to want to do was watch the screen, drink their sweet liqueur, be mindless, or be without the burden of their bodies. I had a fear that I would be left there, discarded amongst these slack limbs, added to this strange collection.

When we were back in the Solicitor's car, I asked him to take me home. It was after midnight, and we had lingered so long that I'd become twitchy, my left leg thrumming so badly that the wingless boy put his hand on it and pressed my heel to the floor till I was still.



The Solicitor turned on his heated seats. The sensation made me sleepy. As he drove, he hooked his hand on my inner thigh, pulled me closer to him. It was the first time a man had touched me sexually. His pinkie finger stroked against my balls, and he asked if they'd dropped yet. I rolled my eyes, pretended his question was juvenile, but really I didn't know what he meant, where did balls drop to, why did he care? As he stroked my balls, he said he would take me home in the morning, east coast to west coast, early enough for school. I turned my face to the window. He said I should stay with him tonight. He said he had a big house.

His house faced out onto blackness. On the distant horizon was a cluster of faint street lights, a small town hunkered on the far side of the firth. The house was on a private road, set back from the water's edge. It was the type of house where some rooms were always dark, big enough that a family could choose to live only in the rear, choose to face only the sunset. I had seen my mother sigh at houses like this from the top deck of an orange bus. It was the first house I had ever been in that did not have wardrobes, no three-piece set of veneered chipboard, that leaned precariously as the glue loosened in the dowels. This man kept his clothing behind a wall of sliding mirrors. There was nothing in his bedroom but a bed and an armchair and me.

He kissed me for a time, slowed me down, sped me up, told me to cover my teeth with my lips. I had a sense of being taught something important and it made me tense. My mind became needle-sharp, but my body felt muffled, my limbs someone else's, dislocated from me. I was smiling as he guided me, criticized me. I became eager to please. And he said that was good. Said I could call him Dad—not Daddy, but Dad, like I needed driving to football practice.

After he undressed me, he left me lying on his bed while he went to the bathroom to get ready. He was gone a long time. Long enough that the blood drained from my cock, and I started to feel the chill of the house. At the bay window I cupped my hands around my eyes and stared out at the black sea, but my fingers left a greasy mark that wors-



"Why buy one in December when you can have them all for free in January?"

ened when I tried to wipe it away. I went to the mirrored doors and quietly slid one back in its tracks. It was the kind of detail that would have killed my mother, and I stood there in my faded boxer shorts, wanting to tell her how each shelf was finished with fine beaded woodwork, each edge delicately carved with a Greek key.

When he returned I was sitting on the bed, my knees curled to my chest. He apologized for taking longer than he thought, rubbed his distended belly, and laughed about how we'd eaten too much. He kissed me again, but now he tugged at me insistently, impatiently. He had a small dick and didn't seem terribly interested in it. He pushed my hand away when I reached for him. He left his own flesh limp.

I was not prepared for the lonely expanse of his back; how he twisted away from me then, left me stranded and staring at that field of white, covered with tufts of hair. It looked like my old school shirt when I petted our dog, before my mother wrapped her hand in Sellotape and pulled the fur from the white cotton. I watched the Solicitor's taut skin expand over his rib cage and the painful-looking knuckles of his spine. His face was cradled in his hands,

and he braced himself on his elbows—it was the same way my mother cried on the carpet in the mornings after a bad blackout, penitent, pitiable. But then the man opened his narrow hips to me, he tilted his meatless buttocks for my pleasure. And all I wanted was to see his forgettable face.

Everything I had gleaned about gay sex was from snippets of the late-night programs that were broadcast after the government watershed: Genet's prisoners, Derek Jarman's "Caravaggio," topless boys dancing in chat-line adverts. I loved the men's-underwear pages in my mother's Littlewoods catalogue, but they taught me nothing about sex. I had thought that two men moved in the same way a man and a woman might—like they did on "Dynasty." I had thought sex was lying together, swooning in another's arms, kissing as you rocked, fitting together easily.

I watched his rib cage expand with sighed impatience. He reached back and inserted a finger inside himself—pointing the way. I held my left elbow with my right hand, folded my arms to my chest. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to go home. He sighed again, houghed into his hand, and reached back toward me. His cupped palm was a lochan of spit and he

smears it on me, guided me into him.

I was inside him for a time, felt the mad pleasure of his tightness before I panicked and backed away. I slid out quickly, my face must have been ashen. Shouldn't we be wearing condoms? I asked. I had seen MTV. It was in all the newspapers, even in the North. The man addressed me over the cliff of his shoulder—talked down to me in the same condescending way Mister Hughes explained polynomials and hypotenuses. He said it was all right because I was the one inside him. Then he bucked, presented himself again, and said it didn't matter anyway. No one could be that unlucky their first time.

I didn't cum, I didn't dare, but he did. Eventually, the charm of my inexperience lost its appeal to him. He grew tired of my disjointed pounding; the harder he demanded I thrust, the further I was pushed from him, as my knees kept sliding away on the fine sheets. He turned over and finished himself onto his own stomach. He lay back, hairless legs splayed, his ankles on my shoulders, while I knelt over him as if I were praying.

In the morning, as the sun came over the firth, we had sex again, slower this time. His body buckled under mine, and he held me at the wrists as though he knew I wanted to pull away. I was muted by how little I felt for him, how much I disliked him, and yet I would have done anything he asked.

Afterward I was too intimidated by his matching, fluffy towels to use them. I showered and waited for my body to drip dry. The glare of his white kitchen hurt my eyes. The back wall opened onto his very own garden and as we stood at the counter I watched the bobbing birds, which he referred to as "my birds," and I wondered then if some people could actually buy blue tits and chaffinches for their own pleasure.

I had my first-ever cup of freshly brewed coffee and pre-sliced fruit for breakfast. I used the teaspoon he provided, and he immediately washed it and set it back next to my cup. I disliked the bitter coffee, so I heaped in more sugar, and again he rose, washed the spoon, dried it, and set it back on my saucer. I started to use the spoon to amuse myself, take sugar I didn't want, and each time I watched him wash it and return

it to my saucer. I wanted to tell my brother. I could never tell my brother. The coffee grew too sweet, I let it get cold.

He gently stroked the back of my hand as he drove me west. I couldn't bear it. The bright morning sunshine was soon blanketed by the fleecy Glasgow sky. I asked him about his "friends"—who were the young men we had met, how did he know them? He arched one fair eyebrow and said they were "the Chickens." He'd met them working the Leith waterfront, selling themselves. Then he huffed in disbelief, said it was wild that they did that, considering that some of them weren't even bent. As the Solicitor stroked my hand, he explained that Wednesday nights were held sacred. "Family night," the Chickens called it, a time to gather, eat a roast dinner, rest their bodies.

I remember being stuck in traffic, certain I would be late for school as the Solicitor played with the zipper on my blue denims. I thought, Shouldn't he be at work—wouldn't he be in trouble for not punching his time card? But as we pulled up before Missus B.'s bedsit it was already midmorning and he was unhurried, unconcerned. As he scowled up at the blackened sandstone, I finally had my chance to squint at the side of his face. I didn't know any other people lucky enough to own themselves entirely.

I arrived late to school, smelling of another man's soap. At lunchtime, I barricaded myself in the art department. I hid among the moldering taxidermy and picked orange cheese from a floury white roll. A charm of third-year girls were being held inside for detention—their hell was my harbor. They were making beaded bracelets for boys they fancied, an idea they had bastardized from the American teen-agers on our televisions. They were weaving red, white, and royal blue; proudly sectarian, Protestant colors. Despite the aggressive hues, it was still unmistakably jewelry, and no boy in Glasgow could wear it without fear of swift violence. But the girls seemed happy and were unusually focussed.

All morning I had been listless, more than simply tired from the night before. I tossed my half-eaten lunch in the bin. There was a dull ache in my sharp hip bones, a pain from where I had battered myself against the man for his pleasure. I would use this pain to excuse myself

early, I thought, go back to my single room, and sleep before the evening shift. I was sorry I had come to school—it seemed suddenly childish to cling to books. I was a man now. I had a pain in my hips that said so.

Someone had stabbed out the eyes of the taxidermized grouse. The jewelers on the other side of the classroom had their heads bowed, their hushed talk was full of confession, punctuated with filthy shrieks. They had abandoned their beads and were decorating one another's arms with blue Biro ink, gouging the names of their beloveds into their flesh. Soon their forearms resembled those of merchant seamen. I used my knuckle to push my glasses up my long nose, and watched them ink themselves for love. I was jealous.

As I had climbed out of the German car, the Solicitor asked me what I would say if people asked where I had been last night and I had shrugged. I laid my head on the desk and thought about all the unanswered lonely hearts. The Solicitor had shoved in line, he had spoiled them for me.

I watched the girls blowing on their forearms, drying the ink before they rolled their shirtsleeves back in place. I could see that they had made a mess of it. That they had misspelled several names. But what did it matter? They would lick at the names they didn't want to wear. It would all wash away.

As I watched the girls, I thought about the crofter's son, the young Highlander who wrote as though he were unworthy of an answer. I had never replied to his letter. His sadness seemed to multiply my own. I had never been able to face it.

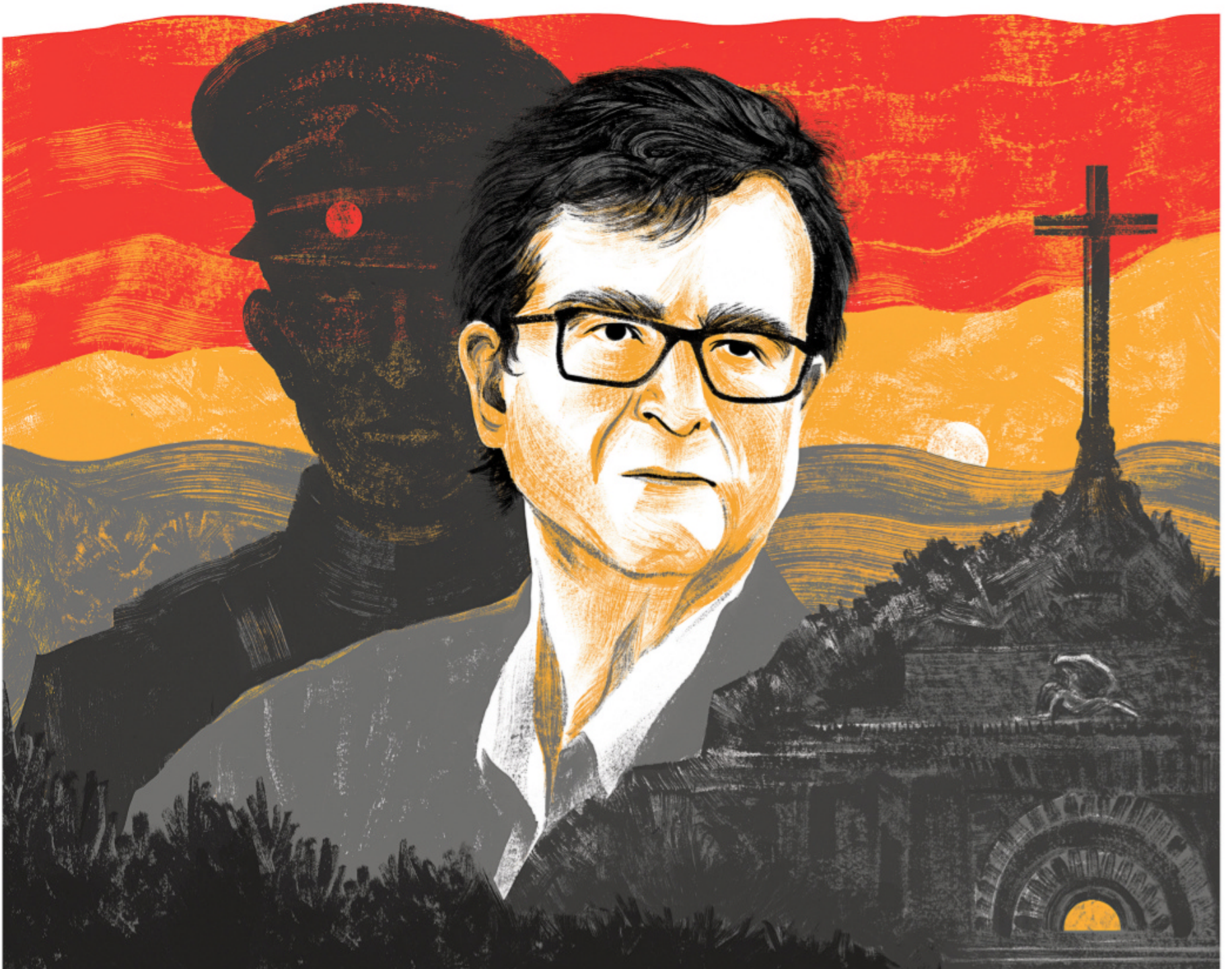
It was heartless of me. I scalded with fresh shame and sat for a long time coating my left palm in layers of craft glue. Eventually, I sat up straight at the vandalized desk. I tore a page from my homework book and pushed the pink nib down on my multi-selector pen.

"Hallo, Gregor," I wrote, without knowing what might come next. "Sorry I haven't written sooner. I'll tell youse why later. But first, tell us more about your mountain. Can you climb over it? What's the nicest thing you can see from the top?" ♦

THE WRITER'S VOICE PODCAST

Douglas Stuart reads "Found Wanting."

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

DON'T LOOK BACK

How the great Spanish champion of historical memory turned on the cause.

BY GILES HARVEY

For much of November, 1975, the American networks carried regular updates on a piece of not quite breaking news: General Francisco Franco, the Fascist dictator who had ruled Spain for thirty-six years, was still alive, if only just. In late October, the eighty-two-year-old caudillo, a staunch U.S. ally in the battle against Communism, had

fallen into a coma after a series of heart attacks. His death seemed imminent, but Franco, who had survived multiple assassination plots, continued to thwart those eager to announce his demise. This didn't stop the networks from broadcasting rolling reports on his non-demise: Franco was in critical condition, Franco was responding to treat-

ment, Franco had taken a turn for the worse. When at last he did expire, on November 20th, the new satirical sketch show "Saturday Night Live" saw an opening. "Our top story tonight," a young Chevy Chase proclaimed in the show's Weekend Update segment a few weeks later, "Generalissimo Francisco Franco is still dead." The writers reprised the

The price of Spain's transition from Fascism to liberal democracy was a political amnesia about Franco's victims.

gag for months. “Generalissimo Francisco Franco has been critically dead now for eleven weeks,” Chase declared in January, “and his doctors refuse to speculate on how long he can last in his present condition.”

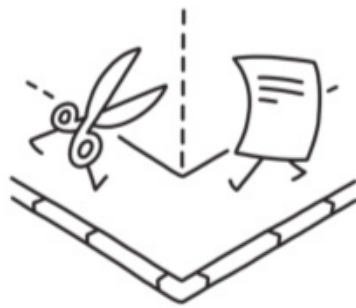
In Spain, many wondered whether Franco had truly made his final exit; the authoritarian system he’d bequeathed the country, with its torture chambers and secret police, looked as immovable as the Pyrenees. “Everything is tied up and well tied,” Franco had said in a speech in 1969, an assurance that, whatever might befall him personally, the status quo he’d inaugurated would remain. And yet within a few years the Francoist establishment had been dismantled, and Spain had made a relatively bloodless transition to liberal democracy. This was a remarkable turn of events, but, to see it through, the country incurred a moral debt that, four decades on, some feel it has yet to fully repay. The cornerstone of the new order was a so-called pact of forgetting, whereby the Old Guard agreed to step aside in return for de facto political amnesty. The left got almost everything it wanted (free elections, a free press, the legalization of trade unions, and, in time, a generous welfare state) except justice for Franco’s countless victims. It seemed like a more than acceptable compromise. To insist on settling scores, it was widely felt, would risk inciting further violence just when everything the Republican side had fought for, in the Civil War of 1936–1939, finally appeared within reach.

Today, the means by which Franco’s legacy was buried has become the subject of contention. Around the turn of the millennium, the children and grandchildren of Franco’s “disappeared”—the tens of thousands of Republicans put to death during the Civil War and the dictatorship—started calling for the exhumation of mass graves and a reckoning with the past. The “historical memory” movement, though largely spontaneous, was catalyzed by a few figures, chief among them the novelist Javier Cercas, one of contemporary Spain’s leading writers.

At the time, Cercas was not an obvious candidate for the role of galvanizing truth-teller. His early work was heavily influenced by the postmodern gamesmanship of American writers such as

Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme. In his first book, “The Motive,” published in 1987, when Cercas was in his mid-twenties, a blocked novelist in search of material manipulates his next-door neighbors into committing a crime: he thinks that all he’ll have to do is write it down. It doesn’t quite come off, for either Cercas or his protagonist, but the synergy—or mutual parasitism—of art and life was a theme from which he would later wring many fruitful variations. The year that the book came out, he took a teaching job at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where his second novel, “The Tenant” (1989), another overdetermined misfire, is set. “I wanted to be an American writer, but in America I found I was Spanish,” Cercas has said.

It was a slow homecoming. Not until “Soldiers of Salamis,” published in 2001, did Spain and its history come into focus as Cercas’s primary subjects. The book is what we would now call a work of autofiction. A down-on-his-luck novelist named Javier Cercas tells us, “Three things had just happened: first my father had died; then my wife had left me; finally, I’d given up my literary career.” Seeking redemption, both personal and collective, he sets out to reconstruct a little-known episode from the Civil War. In early 1939, the writer Rafael Sánchez Mazas, a founding member of Spain’s Fascist party, the Falange, faced a Republican firing squad alongside a number of other Nationalist prisoners in a village a hundred kilometres north of



Barcelona. Somehow the bullets only grazed Sánchez Mazas, who fled into the nearby woods. Within a few minutes, a Republican soldier found him hiding in a ditch, but, for reasons lost to history, the man let him go, shouting to the other members of his search party that no one was there.

Cercas resolves to find the merciful soldier, and, with help from his friend

the Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño, he makes contact with a veteran of the Republican army, Antoni Miralles, now living in an old people’s home in Dijon. Is Miralles—a bruiser with a burning social conscience who fled Franco’s Spain only to enlist in the French Foreign Legion and rejoin the fight against Fascism in the Second World War—the man Cercas is looking for? It’s never definitively established, but the suggestive uncertainty frees up Miralles for broader symbolic purposes. By the end of the book, he has come to embody a history of Republican suffering and resistance that was actively suppressed under Franco and then pragmatically ignored.

“Soldiers of Salamis” was widely embraced as a timely moral intervention in Spanish public life, selling hundreds of thousands of copies and transforming its author from a semi-obscure *littérateur* into a prominent voice for the historical-memory movement. “Who in Spain had ever heard of historical memory when your novel was published?” an admirer asks Cercas in a later book, before going on, “People read it because they needed it, because the country needed it, they needed to remember its Republican past as though they were exhuming it.” Some readers were so moved that they missed the subtle game that “Soldiers of Salamis” was playing with fact and fiction. In reality, Cercas’s father hadn’t died, his wife hadn’t left him, and his literary career hadn’t collapsed; more to the point, although a Republican veteran by the name of Antoni Miralles actually existed, he died before Cercas began working on the book, and almost nothing is known about him. In contrast to Sánchez Mazas, an infamous figure in Spain whose life Cercas clearly took great pains to research, the Miralles of “Soldiers” is largely a product of the author’s imagination—an asymmetry that in itself speaks volumes about the country’s selective interest in its own past. As Cercas—the real Cercas—later put it, “My aspiration was to lie anecdotally, in the particulars, in order to tell an essential truth.”

Having drawn such a resounding response, Cercas might well have been tempted to go on producing work in the same moral key. Instead, he has spent much of his post-“Soldiers” ca-

reer arguing against the very tenets of historical memory: what started out as a legitimate campaign for reparative justice, Cercas feels, soon degenerated into a pageant of sanctimony and opportunism. The country's 2007 Law of Historical Memory provided some support—overdue, in his opinion—for those attempting to trace the remains of family members killed by Franco. Yet Cercas was uneasy about what he considered a government usurpation of free intellectual inquiry. “History is made by historians, not politicians,” he wrote in *El País* at the time. “A law of this kind is embarrassingly evocative of the methods of totalitarian states, which know that the best way to control the present is to control the past.” More broadly, he believed that the sudden vogue for stories of Republican heroics—or what he called “toxic sentimental fodder seasoned with historical good conscience”—was giving rise to the flattering fiction that opposition to Franco had been widespread.

As Cercas makes plain in his latest book, “Lord of All the Dead” (Knopf), finely translated by Anne McLean, the truth is altogether less agreeable. “For most of the time Francoism lasted almost everyone was a Francoist, by commission or omission,” the filmmaker David Trueba, a friend who adapted “Soldiers of Salamis” into a feature film in 2003, says near the start. Cercas’s family was no exception. During the Civil War, his paternal grandfather served as the Falangist mayor of Ibahernando, the village in the western province of Extremadura where Cercas was born, in 1962. Although neither of his parents was particularly interested in politics, they were, up until the end, unabashed supporters of Franco’s regime.

Ibahernando was also the birthplace of his mother’s uncle, Manuel Mena, who, in 1937, at the age of eighteen, volunteered for Franco’s rebel army and died in combat twelve months later, at the Battle of the Ebro. Cercas grew up hearing stories of Uncle Manuel’s self-sacrificing heroism, and even as a young man felt that he would one day have to write a book about him. For years, a sense of shame about his family’s political commitments prevented him from doing so; “Lord of All the Dead” is his attempt to come to grips, at last, with this uncomfortable legacy. “In ‘Soldiers of Salamis’



you invented a Republican hero to hide the fact that your family’s hero was a Francoist,” Trueba says. “Now it’s time to face reality, no? That’s how you can close the circle. And that’s how you can stop writing once and for all about the fucking war and Francoism and all the rest of that shit that tortures you so much.”

As this moral pep talk would suggest, “Lord” is as much the story of Mena’s would-be biographer as it is of Mena himself. Unlike the narrator of “Soldiers of Salamis,” the Cercas we encounter here is not a fictional character (except in the sense that the “I” of any remotely interesting work of nonfiction is always the product of an author’s carefully calibrated choices), and though Mena seems to have left only the scantiest of paper trails, Cercas resists filling in the blanks with flights of imaginative fancy. “This is not fiction and I am no *literato*, so I must confine myself to the safety of facts,” he remarks, and the line is repeated, with variations, throughout the book. Cercas, in other words, is no longer prepared to lie anecdotally in order to tell an essential truth; instead, he will dig through archives, trudge around historic battlefields, and interview the few remaining people (largely decrepit and unforthcoming) who knew his great-uncle. Most of what Cercas learns about Mena could be summarized in a page or two, but since value—or, in this case, narrative payoff—is a function of scarcity, each new scrap of information acquires the momentousness of a major life event.

Mena came from a family of land-owning peasants, who, in the years be-

fore the outbreak of civil war, had begun to feel a sense of allegiance to the local gentry, in contrast to the region’s many landless laborers. Although he inherited the standard-issue piety and patriotism of his social milieu, Mena, an excellent student, seemed destined to become the first member of his family to attend university and escape the confines of village life. That was before July 17, 1936, when Franco launched his military uprising against the left-wing government—a precarious coalition of liberals, socialists, and anarchists—that had come to power in open elections earlier that year. Cercas is a man of a decidedly progressive persuasion, but this doesn’t inhibit his capacity to understand why so many Spaniards, Mena included, regarded the government, with its ambitious plans for land reform and fanatical anticlericalism, as an existential threat to the country and Franco as a national savior.

“Can you be noble and pure and at the same time fight for a mistaken cause?” Cercas asks Trueba, his sounding board and sparring partner, halfway through the book. You can, Trueba answers. “We don’t judge Achilles by the justice or injustice of the cause he died for, but for the nobility of his actions, by the decency and bravery and generosity with which he behaved.” Cercas comes to realize that Mena’s story, like that of Achilles (as narrated in the *Iliad*), gains power from what the ancient Greeks called *kalos thanatos*: a beautiful death. In a characteristically serpentine sentence, Cercas writes, “I thought my mother had spent her whole life telling

me about Manuel Mena because for her there was no better or higher destiny than Manuel Mena's, and I thought, in an instinctive or unconscious way, that I'd become a writer to rebel against her, to avoid the destiny she had wanted to confine me to."

Yet Cercas's sense of the matter begins to change when, during a research trip to the Catalan village where Mena died, he comes across the passage in the *Odyssey* (he's been rereading an old copy from his childhood home) in which Odysseus encounters Achilles in the underworld and tells him how venerated he is aboveground. Achilles bristles. "Don't try to console me for my death," he says. "I would rather toil as the slave of a penniless, landless laborer, than reign here as lord of all the dead."

The following day, as Cercas and his mother visit the place where Mena breathed his last, it dawns on him how devastated she must have been, as a child, by her beloved uncle's fate, and how completely he's misconstrued her fixation on it; what mattered was the cruelty of the loss, not the beauty of the death. "With Manuel Mena's death," Cercas writes, "she had understood to the point of running out of tears that it was a thousand times better to be Odysseus than to be Achilles, to live a long and mediocre and happy life." Cercas realizes a moment later that his efforts at self-definition have been in vain: he's become the very person his mother had always willed him to become—ordinary Odysseus, not glorious Achilles. Whether he's managed to write "the fucking war" out of his system, as Trueba predicted, remains to be seen.

"**L**ord of All the Dead" is a powerful work of D.I.Y. history. It can also be frustratingly elliptical. One understands Cercas's decision to renounce the fictional resources that served him so well in "Soldiers of Salamis" (Mena, the actual Falangist hero, is being offered up as a counterweight to Miralles, the invented Republican one), but the experience of reading a book with so many narrative holes is a bit like visiting a museum where half the collection is out on loan. "I will not ask what Manuel Mena's reaction was when he noticed a bullet had hit him," Cercas writes in the tantalizing description of his subject's

death. "Nor will I wonder how long he was lying there. . . . I will not ask these things because I cannot answer them." The result of this self-restraint is a portrait in negative space; if Mena remains little more than an outline, at least the social world through which he moved is painted with vivid and arresting specificity.

Perhaps the best way to understand "Lord" is to see it as the latest installment in a series of books about the distortions wrought by historical memory. In 2009, Cercas published "The Anatomy of a Moment," an account of the attempted coup d'état, or *golpe de estado*, of February 23, 1981, when an armed group of far-right officers held the parliament in Madrid hostage for some eighteen hours. The *golpistas* were furious about the transition to democracy, during which the military had been brought under civilian control and the Communist Party, its *bête noire*, granted legal status. As the officers fired shots into the air and shouted for everyone to get down on the floor, Adolfo Suárez, Spain's first democratically elected Prime Minister in forty years and one of the chief architects of the transition, remained seated, an act of defiance that Cercas sees as the "founding gesture" of Spanish democracy. The episode was broadcast live on radio, and the following day, after the coup had collapsed, it aired on television.

Cercas has not abandoned fiction altogether—since his breakthrough in 2001, two of the six books he's published, "The Speed of Light" (2005) and "Outlaws" (2012), have been novels—but his turn against historical memory has coincided with an increasing preference for narratives grounded in meticulously researched facts. Initially, he'd tried to write a novel about February 23rd, but he came to feel that the events were so intricate and enthralling as to render novelization redundant. "History fabricates strange figures and does not reject the symmetries of fiction," he says in "The Anatomy of a Moment," in a sentence reminiscent of Borges, one of his acknowledged masters. Nonfiction also seemed the best means for countering what Cercas considers the falsehood, righteously repeated every year on the anniversary of the coup, that the Spanish people and their institutions stood firm against the ene-

mies of democracy. As he sardonically puts it, "The whole country stayed at home and waited for the coup to fail. Or to triumph."

The hypocrisy surrounding February 23rd, Cercas thought, was symptomatic of a larger misconception. With the rise of historical memory came the growing sense, especially on the left, that the pact of forgetting had been a cowardly betrayal and the transition it enabled little more than the perpetuation of Francoism by other means. For Cercas, these are the forgeries of jealousy, the carping of a later generation that has come to take the liberties of modern Spain for granted. Although he concedes that the transition was imperfect, he maintains that "a democracy was constructed that would have been impossible to construct if the prime objective hadn't been that of crafting a future but—*Fiat justitia et pereat mundus*—making amends for the past."

During the transition, many Spaniards, political élites as well as ordinary citizens, began to make themselves over as long-standing opponents of the regime, retouching their pasts to bring them into accord with the democratic present. Few people, however, took things as far as Enric Marco, a Catalan mechanic who falsely claimed (and was widely believed) to have been imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp after fleeing Spain at the end of the Civil War. Marco, the subject of Cercas's 2014 book, "The Impostor," rose to international prominence as the head of the Amical de Mauthausen, an association of Spanish survivors of the Nazi camps, most of them Republican refugees living in France at the time of its occupation by Germany. It was only in 2005, after decades of deception, that he was exposed, thanks to the sleuthing of Benito Bermejo, a historian researching the Republican *deportados*.

Cercas did some sleuthing of his own, and "The Impostor" alternates between Marco's version of his life (not just survival in the camps but years of clandestine anti-Franco struggle back in Spain) and the life he actually led—one of run-of-the-mill conformity. Cercas also conducted extensive interviews with Marco, whom he comes to see as a kind of secret sharer, or evil twin. Both men made a name for themselves by exploiting the

public appetite for historical catharsis that peaked in the early two-thousands. “I did exactly the same thing as you,” Marco says in an imagined conversation between author and subject, in which Cercas dramatizes his sense of guilt and uncertainty over his own appropriation of Spain’s past traumas. “I invented a guy like Miralles,” Marco continues, “except that this Miralles was alive and he visited schools and talked to children about the horrors of the Nazi camps and about Spanish inmates there, and about justice and freedom and solidarity.” What Cercas understands, and Marco does not, is the difference between muddling fact and fiction in a work of art and muddling them in real life. “The novelist’s deception is consensual,” Cercas says, although he also raises the possibility that a Spain ravenous for that “toxic sentimental fodder seasoned with historical good conscience” willingly suspended its disbelief.

“Lord of All the Dead” is a different sort of story. It will neither flatter liberal pieties nor assuage feelings of collective guilt. It may help Spaniards, and people farther afield, to better understand the lure of Fascism, a pressing task in today’s world, as Cercas has said in recent interviews. In 2018, Spain’s Socialist Workers’ Party, which had passed the historical-memory law of 2007, returned to power after six and a half years of conservative rule, and set about completing unfinished business. This past October, after much delay, the government finally exhumed Franco’s remains from the Valley of the Fallen, the monumental basilica outside Madrid where they’ve been buried since 1975, and moved them to a less august location. Not everyone approved of this symbolic demotion. The following month, Pedro Sánchez, the Socialist Prime Minister, was narrowly reelected after a snap vote, but the new, ultra-right Vox Party, the first of its kind to gain traction in Spain’s democratic era, was among the contest’s real winners, more than doubling its number of seats in the Spanish legislature. For a long time, it was thought that the country’s experience of dictatorship had inoculated it against the revanchist nationalism sweeping Europe. Franco is still dead, but the need to monitor his condition has never been more urgent. ♦



BRIEFLY NOTED

Zed, by Joanna Kavenna (*Doubleday*). This speculative novel depicts a society in which citizens live and die by the auguries of predictive algorithms developed by a mega-corporation called Beetle. The orderly, preordained world that Beetle insures is upended when seemingly random events caused by human folly—instances known as Zed—overwhelm the company’s machinery, rendering its predictions futile. As those in power race to stop Zed, a news editor investigating the phenomenon, which he assumed came from a dim, inscrutable corner of the human psyche, finds that “infinite Zed was around him. He was being swept onward, downward, ushered entirely!”

Return to the Enchanted Island, by Johary Ravaloson, translated from the French by Allison M. Charette (*Amazon Crossing*). When we meet Ietsy Razak, the protagonist of this delicate and captivating novel, he is a sleepless husband and father whose comforts are provided for “in advance and in abundance” by inherited family wealth. The story soon flashes back to his rebellious youth and subsequent banishment from Madagascar to France, where he is surprised by the presence of racism but finds little in common with other people of color. Ietsy feels bound to greatness by his given name, which he shares with a hero of Malagasy mythology, yet this character study highlights the hazards of leading an entitled life, in which he only “slowly became aware that other wills existed besides his own.”

Music: A Subversive History, by Ted Gioia (*Basic*). A song is sung by a person of ill repute: a huckster, a herder, a whore. She’s soon forgotten, but, within a generation, someone else—a rock star, a rich man, a writer of symphonies—has made her song famous, and the world sounds different. Arguing that assimilation is “the engine room of music history,” Gioia treks from the cult songs of Mesopotamia to the melody factories of modern times, finding lost music along the way. Sound, “as a source of discipline and as a gateway to transcendence,” can be powerfully disruptive, but we hear only the sanitized version. In this radical history, that means “the most important part of the story has been left out.”

Supreme Ambition, by Ruth Marcus (*Simon & Schuster*). The week before Marcus published her account of the confirmation battle over Brett Kavanaugh, President Trump took to Twitter, calling the book “a badly written & researched disaster.” In fact, with meticulous reporting, Marcus reveals the high-level plotting that preceded Trump’s politically fraught pick and probes the drama that followed it. She bolsters the claims of Christine Blasey Ford and Deborah Ramirez, who accused Kavanaugh of sexual assault, with the account of a Yale classmate who witnessed Kavanaugh exposing himself in college. In what Marcus calls “an inexcusable lapse,” the F.B.I. declined to interview the classmate. Marcus deftly shows that disregard for the truth in service of partisan gain is not just a Trump trademark. It has infected the Senate, the Justice Department, and, with Kavanaugh’s confirmation, the highest court in the land.

ORIGINAL RECIPES

Appetite and anxiety in Tommy Pico's poems.

BY DAN CHIASSON



Tommy Pico's book-length poem "Feed" (Tin House) is, like a social-media feed, a scrolling, constantly refreshing "now," an adrenalized present that contains many versions of the past, including the past of the feed itself. "Hindsight/is Good & Plenty I mean 20/20/clearly/the worst American/candy," Pico writes. His "hindsight" extends from dead memes to old flames, from the etymology of the word "fart" to his own origins "on a food/desert, a speck/of dust on the map of the United / States" where "the average age of death is 40.7 years old." It's the mortal hurry in "Feed" that makes its flippancy terrifying. Pico, "restless/searching for a nourishing territory," is both death-defying and morbid. Sylvia Plath's simplest line may be one of her most devastating: "I am only thirty."

I feel the same shudder when I read Pico's blunt report: "I am 34."

Pico, who lives in Brooklyn and Los Angeles, grew up on the Viejas Reservation of the Kumeyaay Nation, near San Diego. "Feed" completes his "Teebs Cycle" of four book-length poems ("How does everyone know the word 'tetralogy' but me"), which together form a rich anthology of the surprising modes of interiority in our present moment. Pico's model for thinking is a brand-new one, and impossible to separate from its contemporary context. A "feed" of information isn't a leisurely stream of consciousness; it updates itself manically, as if with a refresh button.

"Feed" is a road book, brightly discombobulated, written on the wing, full of grabbed meals, lucky sex, and appeal-

ingly corny jokes ("Tonight I am pierogies/Ross Pierogies"). Teebs, a nickname, is also a persona: a "hoar on a book tour" ("hoar," since he has outlived some of his friends and family back home, "whore" because he peddles his art from city to city). And yet the road can provide "a kind of stability/being so thoroughly Teebs I mean seen," where "seen" means both exposed to harsh scrutiny and acknowledged as a soul. Like Beyoncé, who knows that "the grain of performance is her feed," Teebs performs, while Pico's deeper, more fragile self "hides or hurricanes away onstage."

Pico's poems are full of hastily transcribed talk ("Me n Leo yakkity yak yak'd/about writer's/block"), text abbreviations, dazzling puns, and Grindr jargon. Like the three previous books in the cycle—"IRL" (2016), "Nature Poem" (2017), and "Junk" (2018)—"Feed" owes a little to A. R. Ammons, whose long poem for typewriter and adding-machine tape, "Garbage," inspired Pico's "Junk"; and a little to Frank O'Hara, who pressurized language by shimming expression into finite temporal intervals (thus "Lunch Poems"). Ammons, who could control the rate of his unrolling tape by slowing down his writing, liked to potter around. O'Hara, who had to get back to work, was always frantic. Pico, haunted by news from the rez ("My cousin died today/and he was only two years older"), has his own reasons for rushing. "I would LOVE to imagine/being alive in five/years," he writes, "but I have these bones u know?"

Pico's impulse, when faced with mortality, is often to filibuster, sometimes with hilarious results. In a section about smoking a spliff on the balcony, a friend's pointed question about Pico's ex turns into a far-out conversation about extraterrestrials, as though the poem were getting stoned as well. Pico contends that aliens could still be on their way; his friend points out that they may already have arrived: "History basically *just* started recording itself."

Despite its frenetic forward motion, "Feed" is a recording device, a poem that commemorates personal history, relationship history, literary history, and American history. A social-media feed commemorates its own milestones—five years ago today, it alerts you, you uploaded this picture. When you open "Feed," Pico is

ambushed by just such a reminder. On a forested stretch of New York's High Line, Leo, an old boyfriend, appears:

Optimal frustration from the Odysseus
years Golden Fleece of
intimacy
for the first time in like what
6 months?
A year?
Two years?
Seven years?
Has it been SEVEN years? 1492? It was
literally 69 billion years BC

Seven years might as well be an eternity. The crack about 1492 suggests that the relationship was more a conquest than an "Optimal frustration," unless, by way of "Odysseus," the whole affair was a Trojan horse, or perhaps a giant ripoff—a "fleece."

The linear experience of time always also embeds circular recurrence, with old patterns reasserting themselves. The High Line, that strip of reclaimed elevated tracks, captures this kind of temporality: the structure is long and narrow like a poem, planted with simulated natural environments. Wandering the strip at the height of spring—another reminder of life's cycles—Pico names the flowers and grasses as he goes along, luxuriating in the pronunciation of their Latin names ("purple moor grass, *Molinia caerulea*; moh-LIN-ee-ah ser-OO-lee-ah").

It all sounds idyllic, but, as anyone who has visited the High Line knows, it's not an oasis. It is yet another kind of feed, a bottleneck of onrushing crowds. Its hip-deep immersion in the city is weirdly illicit, offering glimpses into people's apartments and hotel rooms. Fancy tourists process as in a pageant. The effect is anti-pastoral, and, if you're texting or scrolling as you walk, those activities add their own jolts. Global news breaks into "Feed" in all caps ("DEATH TOLL IN PUERTO RICO CLOSER TO 5,000 THAN THE OFFICIAL COUNT OF 64"), at the same time that personal news does. A text shows up: "*Mom does not want to be hooked up to no machines she texts / day after Auntie passes That's not prolonging life that's extending death.*"

As "Feed" progresses, the older meanings and associations of "feed" reassert themselves. Sexual hunger pulls Pico off the feed and toward the world, and sometimes toward disenchantment;

meals are scarfed down on the road, or prepared at home, slowly, with some self-pity mixed in. In one of the book's interactive strokes, it contains recipes:

Did you know molasses emulsifies the olive
oil and keeps the little
fat
molecules from stumbling
into each other, thus allowing the oil and
vinegar
to mix?

The thin scrim of innuendo in these recipe-like sections reminds us that a cookbook is among the most intimate forms of literature, guiding readers through a series of actions they must perform with their bodies. Like a book of poetry, it is a collaboration with a stranger. "Dear Reader," Pico writes, "We are in a pot. // One of us is the vegetables and one of us is the water. I can't tell who is cooking who."

This book is breakup art, cycling back over and over to Leo, but, like most poetry about heartbreak, it also acts as a lure. Its tactics are sometimes painfully transparent. "I've tended to the garden / of our memories," Pico writes, near the end of "Feed," "like a recipe / for feelings." Really? The mixtape, another time-honored way of curating feelings—once archaic, now weirdly reborn—conveys more authentic emotion. Pico punctuates "Feed" with songs, labelled Tracks 1 through 19 (from Beyoncé's "XO" to "Up the Ladder to the Roof," by the Supremes), personally annotated. This is nostalgia weaponized against an ex, and nearly everyone with a pulse has at one time or another gone down that road. If there isn't a playlist drawn from Pico's text, there soon will be.

With these poems in hand, you can go out and experience a whole world of sensation. They steer you to a spot for two-dollar sushi rolls, and tell you which Connecticut rest stop has a Sbarro. Pico's imperative to leave the book behind is low-key Whitmanian: "You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books." But his language is itself firsthand experience of the most startling intensity, variety, and durability. The dream of "Feed" is to escape the feed; by picking this book up and reading it, we're already much of the way there. ♦

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MIND STORMS

"Wozzeck" and "The Queen of Spades," at the Met.

BY ALEX ROSS



Your judgment of the new Metropolitan Opera production of Alban Berg's "Wozzeck," which runs through January 22nd, may depend on how you classify it. The director is the South African artist William Kentridge, who is steeped in the Central European Expressionist milieu from which Berg's ferocious anti-military opera emerged. If the staging is considered as an entry in Kentridge's multimedia oeuvre, it delivers a potent distillation of signature motifs: brusque drawings and prints of wounded faces and ravaged landscapes; stop-action animation of spasmodically jerking figures; photographic collages and cinematic montages. If, however,

you measure the work against the emotional breadth of Berg's opera, you may find it wanting. On opening night, I admired the virtuosity of the director's technique but wished that he had paid more heed to the desperate inner lives of the characters.

Kentridge has transplanted "Wozzeck" from the early-nineteenth-century setting of Berg's libretto to the period of the First World War. This makes good sense, since Berg served in the Austro-Hungarian Army from 1915 to 1918 and began composing the opera during the conflict. Berg fashioned the libretto directly from Georg Büchner's 1837 play, "Woyzeck," an unblinking portrayal of

an ordinary soldier's degradation by military discipline and medical experiment. Berg wrote of Wozzeck, "There is a bit of me in this character, since I have been spending these war years just as dependent on people I hate, have been in chains, sick, captive, resigned, in fact humiliated."

Büchner's text, fragmentary in form and corrosive in tone, is famously prophetic of twentieth-century concerns. Berg could hardly have found anything more modern among the playwrights of his own period; the young Bertolt Brecht was one of many under Büchner's spell. Yet Berg brings to bear his own preoccupations—in particular, a nostalgia for a shattered fin-de-siècle world. Although the music of "Wozzeck" is ostensibly atonal, glimmers of Wagner, Puccini, Mahler, and Strauss shine through the work's dark façade. The most piercing lyricism is reserved for Wozzeck's common-law wife, Marie, who falls victim to his madness. Her monologue at the beginning of Act III, in which she reads from the Bible and ponders her child's bleak future, is obviously modelled on Desdemona's "Ave Maria" scene in Verdi's "Otello." It is this half-buried Romantic dimension that goes missing in Kentridge's production.

Although the Great War looms over every moment of the staging, it never becomes clear whether we are experiencing Wozzeck's nightmarish premonitions of the conflict or his shell-shocked recollections of it. Characters often wear gas masks, hobble on crutches, and have bandages on their heads. Maps of troop movements in Flanders are projected onto a large screen behind the stage. The sets, designed by Sabine Theunissen, deploy sculptural accumulations of junk to render the locales where Wozzeck experiences successive humiliations: a captain's quarters, a doctor's laboratory, a tavern garden, a soldiers' barracks. Greta Goiris, the costume designer, applies fantastical touches to drab uniforms and workaday wear. A blood-red gown for Marie stands out against a mostly black-and-white color scheme.

Kentridge is at his best when crowds fill the stage, matching the teeming density of his visual aesthetic. His most bravura gesture comes in Act III, as Wozzeck staggers away from the pond where he has murdered Marie and into a bar full of drunkenly dancing figures.

The baritone Peter Mattei, in front of a projection by William Kentridge.

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THE
NEW YORKER

Berg prepares the change of scene with two enormous orchestral crescendos on the single note B, the second louder than the first. Kentridge made the inspired decision to have dancers enter during the second crescendo, both on the stage and on the screen at the back. They appear to be emanating from the concentrated beam of sound. Much less successful is Kentridge's illustration of the overpowering final interlude, which follows Wozzeck's death, by drowning. The triple-forte climax of the passage was marked by a groaningly obvious sequence of explosions on the screen.

The unremitting focus on war iconography blotted out the opera's main narrative thrust: the deterioration of Wozzeck's mind in the grip of military routine. Crucially, in Büchner's scenario, the soldier is not at war but serving in a town regiment; violence explodes from the machinery of the system. The baritone Peter Mattei, who took the lead role, is one of the finest singing actors in opera, but in this staging he had little opportunity to trace the character's arc toward madness; too often he seemed like an extra in a larger tableau. Elza van den Heever, as Marie, was similarly sidelined by the pervasive imagery of masculine aggression. Psychology has never been Kentridge's strong suit as a director—it was also a blind spot in his previous Met productions, of Shostakovich's "The Nose" and of Berg's "Lulu"—but here the characterizations are weaker than ever.

It's instructive to compare this brilliant but somehow hollow affair with "The Head and the Load," Kentridge's monumental theatrical tribute to African soldiers who served in the Great War. It played at the Park Avenue Armory at the end of 2018; I saw it in Amsterdam last May. Many of the same visual tropes were employed in that production, yet its episodic, pageantlike structure proved a better counterweight to Kentridge's thematic obsessions. In "Wozzeck," his agenda is too often at cross-purposes with that of Berg, for whom psychology was everything.

The one singer who held his own amid the swirl of images was the tenor Gerhard Siegel, who delivered the part of the Captain with cartoonish flair and precisely biting diction. He was, perhaps not incidentally, the cast's only native German speaker. Mattei and van den

Heever both sang superbly, but the blunt force of Büchner's language didn't always register. I had similar reservations about the conducting of Yannick Nézet-Séguin. He showed unerring command of Berg's devilishly difficult score, but he dispatched it too cleanly and efficiently. His pristine account of the final interlude failed to convey its melancholy collapse into the Mahlerian past. In all, this was a "Wozzeck" lacking in both horror and humanity.

The day after Thanksgiving, the young Norwegian soprano Lise Davidsen made her Met debut, as Lisa in Tchaikovsky's "The Queen of Spades." I caught up with her performance a couple of weeks later, and had no serious argument with colleagues who had acclaimed her as one of the strongest dramatic voices to have arrived at the house in many years. Davidsen, equipped with both silver-bright top notes and a warmly expressive, mezzo-like lower range, has the elemental gift of being able to fill the gigantic Met auditorium with rich, blazing tone. Such effortless force has not been often heard at Lincoln Center since the retirement of Birgit Nilsson, the most superhuman of singing Scandinavians.

Davidsen has been performing opera for less than ten years, and so far her voice is more impressive as a technical phenomenon than as a fully musical one. Each pitch gleams perfectly in place, but in "The Queen of Spades" she seldom shaped the notes into authoritative phrases or paragraphs. In this respect, she reminds me of the young Deborah Voigt, who made a prodigious first impression at the Met in the early nineteen-nineties but never quite delivered the theatrical goods. Davidsen appears destined for a major career singing Wagner and Strauss, but to fulfill that promise she will need to articulate texts more sharply than she does on her debut recording, on the Decca label. That said, the power of her voice is an event in itself, and it is the kind of power that sacrifices nothing in the way of beauty. Even more notably, Davidsen intersperses displays of force with delicate lyrical strokes. This was the wonder of her Act III monologue in "The Queen of Spades," in which she averts her gaze from the darkness consuming her lover. Greater wonders presumably await. ♦

WITNESSES

"Les Misérables" and "Clemency."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Many moviegoers, noting the arrival of "Les Misérables," will assume that Tom Hooper's musical extravaganza of 2012 has been granted a rerelease. That would certainly be a pleasure; one should never spurn the opportunity to watch Russell Crowe singing slightly too high for (a) his manly britches and (b) his peace of

Paris, thousands upon thousands of people are gathering to watch the game in bars, or on public screens, and Issa and his buddies join the throng. Their ardor is inflamed by pride, for the brightest young star on the French team, Kylian Mbappé, hails from Bondy, not far west of Montfermeil, the rough suburb where Issa lives; Mbappé is the son of a Cam-

suffering heroine of Hugo's book, goes there with her daughter.) We tag along with a taciturn fellow named Ruiz (Damien Bonnard), who is reporting for duty on his first day with the local police; specifically, with the Street Crimes Unit, or S.C.U. In practice, his job involves cruising around the district in the company of Chris (Alexis Manenti), his feral superior, with their cool-tempered colleague Gwada (Djebril Zonga) at the wheel. Chris's nickname is Pink Pig, and he's happy to accept it—revelling in his reputation as a brute, truffling for trouble and, if necessary, creating it where none exists. His idea of fun is to confront teen-age girls at a bus stop and sniff their fingers, claiming to smell drugs. When one girl tries to film him, mid-provocation, he grabs her phone and throws it to the ground.

The gesture is a telling one, because—in France as elsewhere—what actually happens in any flash point between suspects and officers of the law matters less than what can be proved to have happened. Hence the importance of Buzz (Al-Hassan Ly), a harmless kid with a potentially damaging drone at his command; on a lark, he flies it from the roof of his apartment building, in Les Bosquets, the infamous projects of Montfermeil. The drone is equipped with a camera, and, pretty much by accident, it captures video footage of Issa, who is wanted for questioning, being chased by the S.C.U. He is grievously wounded by one of his pursuers—precisely the sort of incident that could stoke a riot. So what will Buzz do with the memory card from the drone? And can, or should, Pink Pig prevent its contents going viral?

"Les Misérables" is hardly alone in patrolling the zone of the disenfranchised. Think of Mathieu Kassovitz's "La Haine," which, nearly a quarter of a century ago, led us into outlying patches of Paris where few films had previously trod. And Chris, for all his bigotry, doesn't stand particularly tall in the cinematic roster of corrupted cops; he wouldn't last long in a snarl-off against someone like Mike Brennan, the mountainous bully played by Nick Nolte in Sidney Lumet's "Q & A" (1990).

What is unusual about Ly's movie, however, and oddly counterintuitive, is that it plucks at your nerves most tightly



In Ladj Ly's film, the residents of a tough Paris suburb clash with the police.

mind. Alas, the new "Les Misérables" really is new, and crushingly Crowe-free, and although a quotation from Victor Hugo is tacked onto the end, the story bears only the faintest relation to his enormous novel.

On the other hand, we do hear the populace singing en masse—in the opening minutes, with the credits still under way. And the first thing we see is a kid named Issa (Issa Perica) wearing a French tricolor as if it were a cape, with a matching daub of red, white, and blue on his cheek. "Bet you five that Mbappé scores," he says to a friend, at which point any soccer fans in the audience will know just what's going on.

It's July 15, 2018, and France is playing Croatia in the World Cup final. In

eronian father and an Algerian mother, and most of the characters mustering in "Les Misérables," likewise, are of African descent—as is Ladj Ly, the movie's director, who was born in Mali. When the French win the Cup (Mbappé having scored their final goal), we are shown the Champs-Élysées, crammed with a merry mob: the ultimate image of a festive, multiethnic, and self-confident nation, whose chanting citizens have laid aside their differences and united in joy. It's enough to make a politician swoon. Up comes the title, in huge letters: "Les Misérables." Ouf.

The rest of the film, unfolding in the wake of the sporting triumph, is set almost entirely in Montfermeil. (Ly himself grew up there, and Fantine, the long-

not when the plot speeds up—during the quest for Buzz’s damning evidence, say—but as the police mosey through their parish, greeting the locals (including one whom they put in jail a few years back) and browsing the goods at a street market. Kids get their kicks from tobogganing down a concrete slope on the lid of a plastic trash can; an argument rumbles, rages, and subsides over the kidnapping of somebody named Johnny, who, it turns out, isn’t human at all. He’s a lion cub from the circus. If you yield to these strolling, often light-hearted sequences, it’s because they seem plausible and bereft of strain; and also because, though nothing explodes, you realize that anything could. There’s no shortage of people who are itching to light the fuse.

The dénouement of the film left me split in two. The mood appears to die down, in twilit tranquillity, at the close of Ruiz’s début day, with *Les Bosquets* gilded by the sun’s last rays. You feel exhausted yet satisfied; somehow, for now, Ruiz and his comrades have kept anarchy at bay. That’s all, folks! Except it’s not. Ly isn’t finished with us. The movie flickers back to life like a Terminator, plowing onward for another twenty minutes or more, and the sense of suspended animation is snapped; everything that has hitherto been hinted at—the will to rebel, a deep resentment of the state, the furies of disenfranchised youth—now erupts. Montfermeil goes to war.

There’s no denying the fervor of the conflict that ensues, up and down the stairwells of the projects, but do we need it? Would Ly not have done better to let “*Les Misérables*” hang fire at

dusk, the evening before? I can’t decide. What I do know is that the look on Issa’s face, in the final shot, is swollen with such unappeasable contempt for the established order of things that the future, not just for France, seems suddenly and hopelessly dark. So much for the soccer-loving boy, draped in the national flag. Victor Hugo would watch this film and weep.

Let us pry, though not too deeply, into the minds and the motives of those who decide when a film should be released. Profitability, I guess, is the main driving force, along with a delicate sense of the seasonal; “*Jaws*,” for instance, came out on June 20, 1975, just as most hard-working sharks and their families were heading for the beach. With all due respect, however, I cannot fathom the plan of action for “*Clemency*,” a new film from Chinonye Chukwu. Maybe some bright spark stood up in a meeting and said, “Hey, guys, it’s all about death row. Let’s bring it out at Christmas!”

The movie’s moral and emotional burden rests on the capable shoulders of Alfre Woodard. She plays Bernadine Williams, the warden of a prison where executions are carried out via lethal injection. One of her duties is to witness them. Bernadine is married to Jonathan (Wendell Pierce), a schoolteacher, who feels increasingly walled off from her. A wedding-anniversary date that he arranges—dinner at home, candles, wine, “*Sexy Mama*” on the turntable—warms toward intimacy and then freezes. (The whole scene, finely paced by Woodard and Pierce, is one of those passages which are doomed to become favorite audition pieces at drama schools

across the land.) The only spot where Bernadine can unwind is the Blue Star bar; she tends to stop there for a glass or two of whiskey after work. Given the nature of that work, she could use a bottle.

“*Clemency*” has many strengths, not least the performances of Aldis Hodge as Anthony Woods, a convicted murderer awaiting his fate in a kind of fuming trance, and Richard Schiff as his lawyer, rumpled and grayed by thirty years of principled effort, to limited avail. As he says, “When I win, my client gets to not die.” Yet the movie’s energies drop perceptibly in the middle section; lines of dialogue are recited at a sluggish rate, with lengthy pauses, as if the pressure of the presiding theme had numbed the characters’ tongues.

Here’s the irony. Everything that Chukwu has to say, and to show, is contained in the bookends of his film—the two executions that we observe, one near the beginning and the other at the end. I could imagine them being clipped out of the movie and projected simultaneously in a diptych, as a video installation. The first death goes wrong, with the appointed medic unable to find a suitable vein through which the chemicals will pass; the second goes right, although what in God’s name, you want to ask, is so *right* about it? By now, Bernadine’s fear that she is acting, however conscientiously, in the service of a great wrong has all but consumed her. Clad in angelic white, awash in unprofessional tears, and scarcely able to move, she stands at the head of the expiring man. As his heartbeat slows and stops, we don’t see his face, and we don’t need to. Hers is enough. ♦

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Mark Thompson, must be received by Sunday, January 12th. The finalists in the December 23rd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 27th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

THE FINALISTS



“Well, he did say he'd be back again someday.”
Stephanie Kraynick, Minneapolis, Minn.

“Great, now they all want a scarf.”
Siddharta Reddy, Philadelphia, Pa.

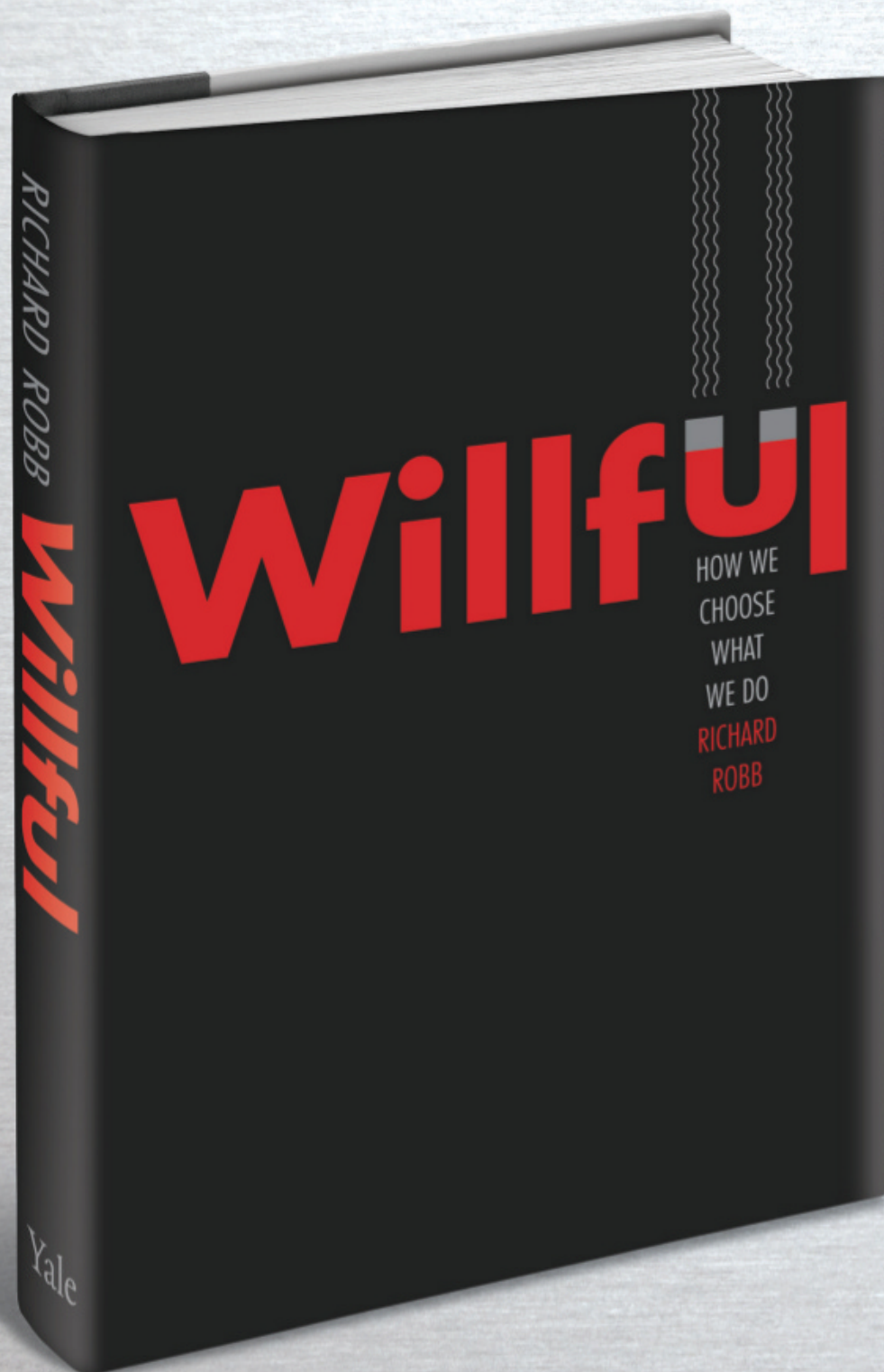
“Invite them in if you want to get rid of them.”
John Earl, Bethel, Vt.

THE WINNING CAPTION



*“Yes, but just a couple of meads, probably
more than an hour ago.”*
Peter Harrington, Holden, Mass.

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breakthrough
in economics.”***



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—*EDMUND S. PHELPS,
Nobel Laureate in Economics



PHOTO © NINA SUBIN

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—GILLIAN TETT, *Financial Times*

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